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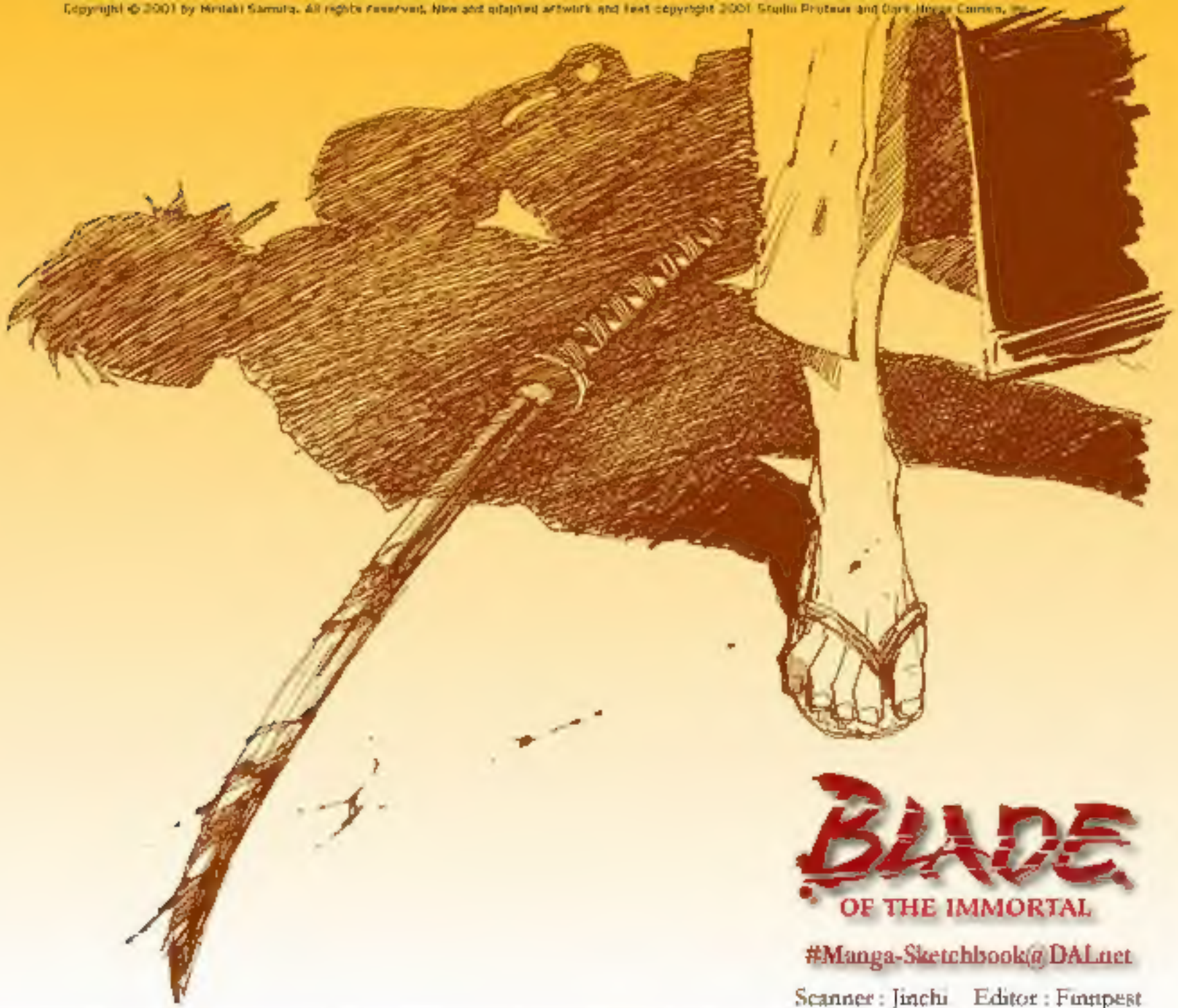


BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

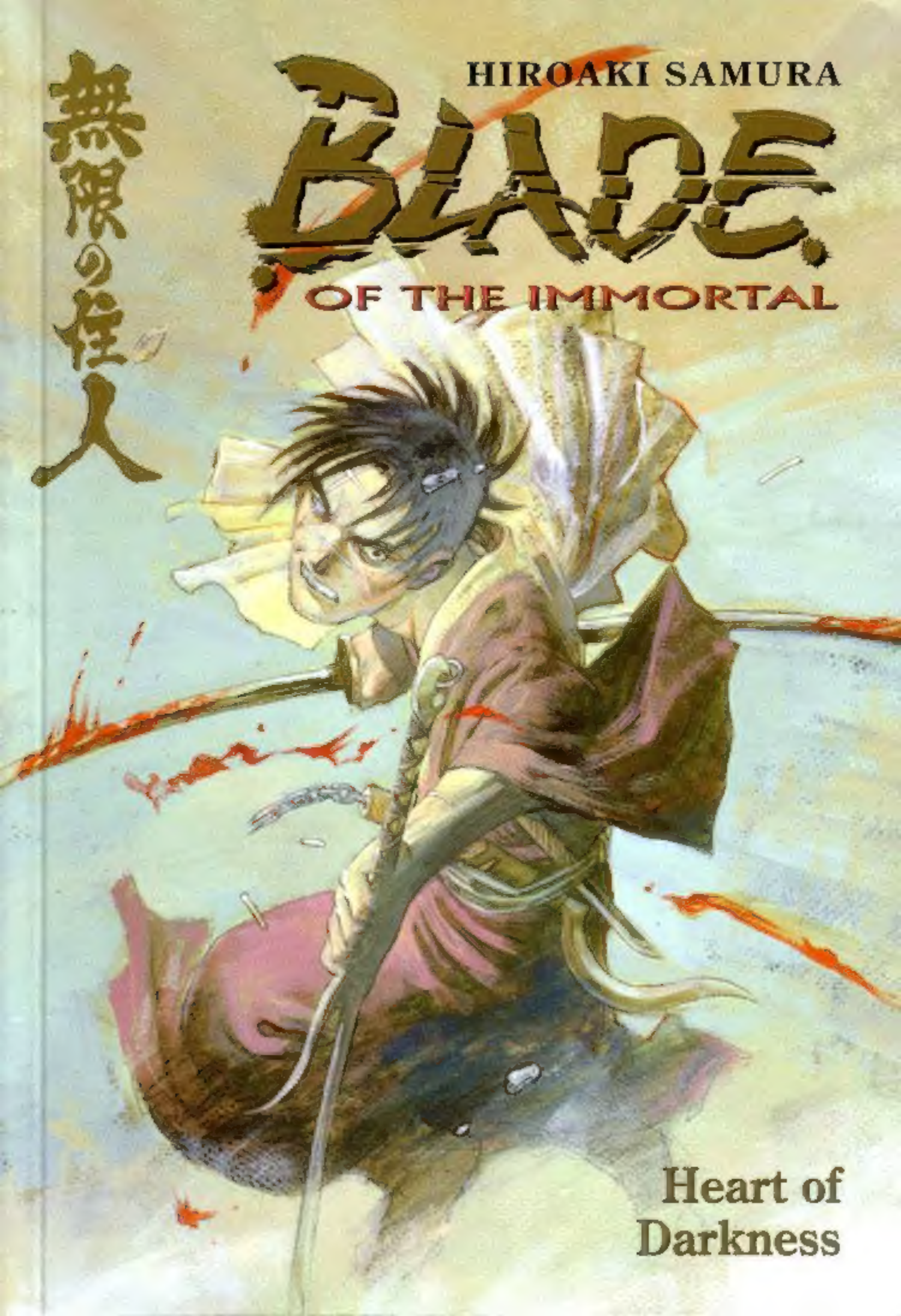
#Manga-Sketchbook@DALnet

Scanner : Jinchu Editor : Funnpest

HIROAKI SAMURA

BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

無限の住人



Heart of Darkness

BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

Heart of Darkness

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BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL Vol. 7: HEART OF DARKNESS
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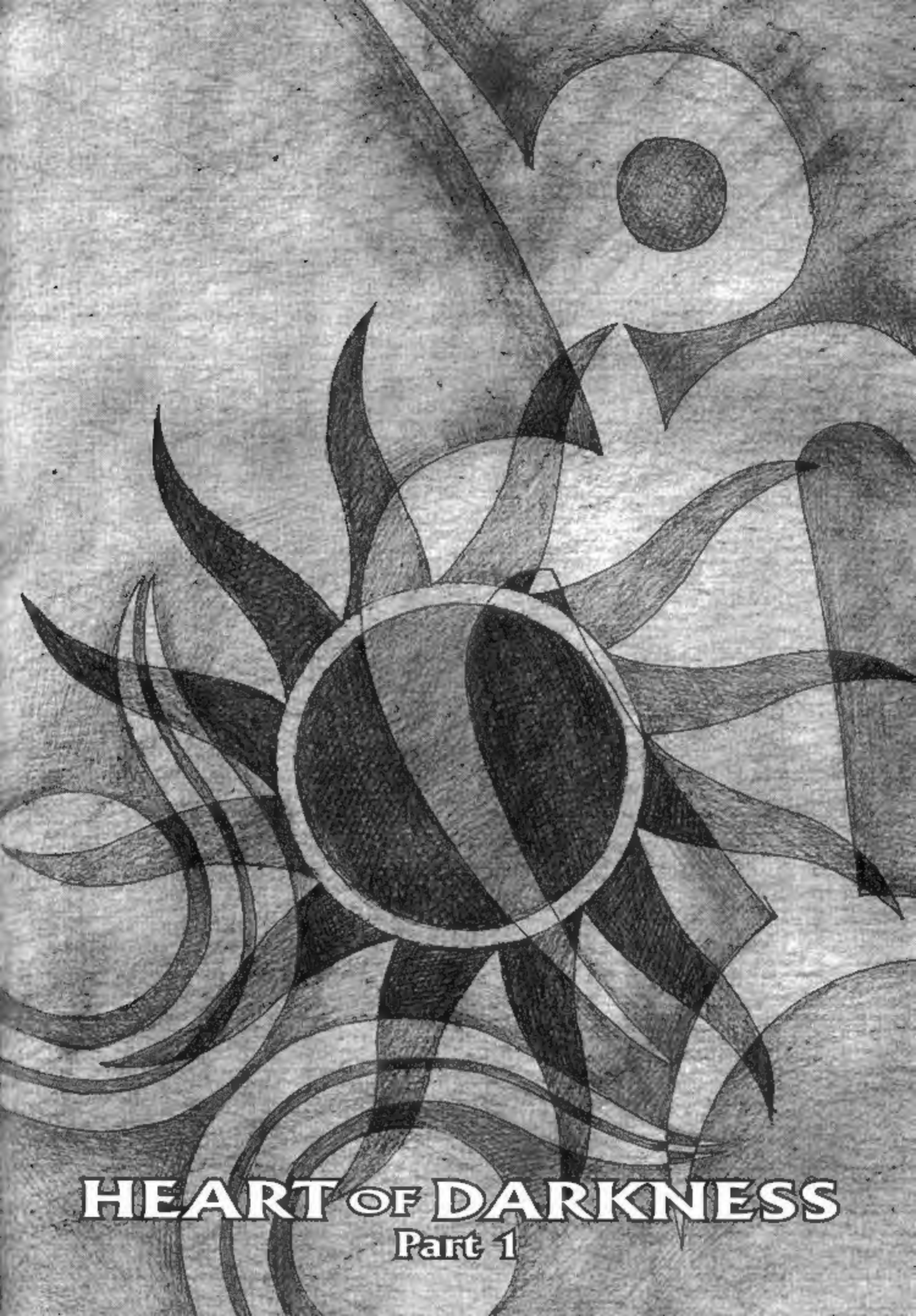
translation
Dana Lewis & Toren Smith

lettering and retouch
Tomoko Saito

Heart of Darkness

DARK HORSE COMICS®


HEART OF DARKNESS
Part 1

whew..
I'M BEAT.
YO! ANYBODY HOME?!
ABAYAMA SŌSUKE IS HERE, UNDERSTAND?! YOUR NEW BOSS!

AH! WE'VE BEEN AWAITING YOU, SIR!
WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?
I'VE JUST JOINED, SIR.
WHAT'S YOUR NAME, SON?
MAKOTO, SIR.
AND YOUR FAMILY NAME?
ACTUALLY, SIR... I DON'T HAVE ONE. WE WERE PEASANTS...
A PEASANT, HUH? I'LL BE DAMNED.

THAT MAKES YOU NUMBER TWO. DAMN... AN EDICT FROM THE SHŌGUN, A HORSE TURD ON THE ROAD...
...THEY'RE BOTH THE SAME TO THE GOOD OLD ITTŌ-RYŪ, EH?
SO...
WHY NOT JUST PICK SOME NAME, LIKE MAGATSU DID?
I SUPPOSE I COULD, SIR.
BUT FOR NOW, JUST "MAKOTO" IS ENOUGH.
SO TELL ME, SON, FROM BEGINNING TO END--
--TELL ME HOW FUSANO AND MOROZUMI DIED.

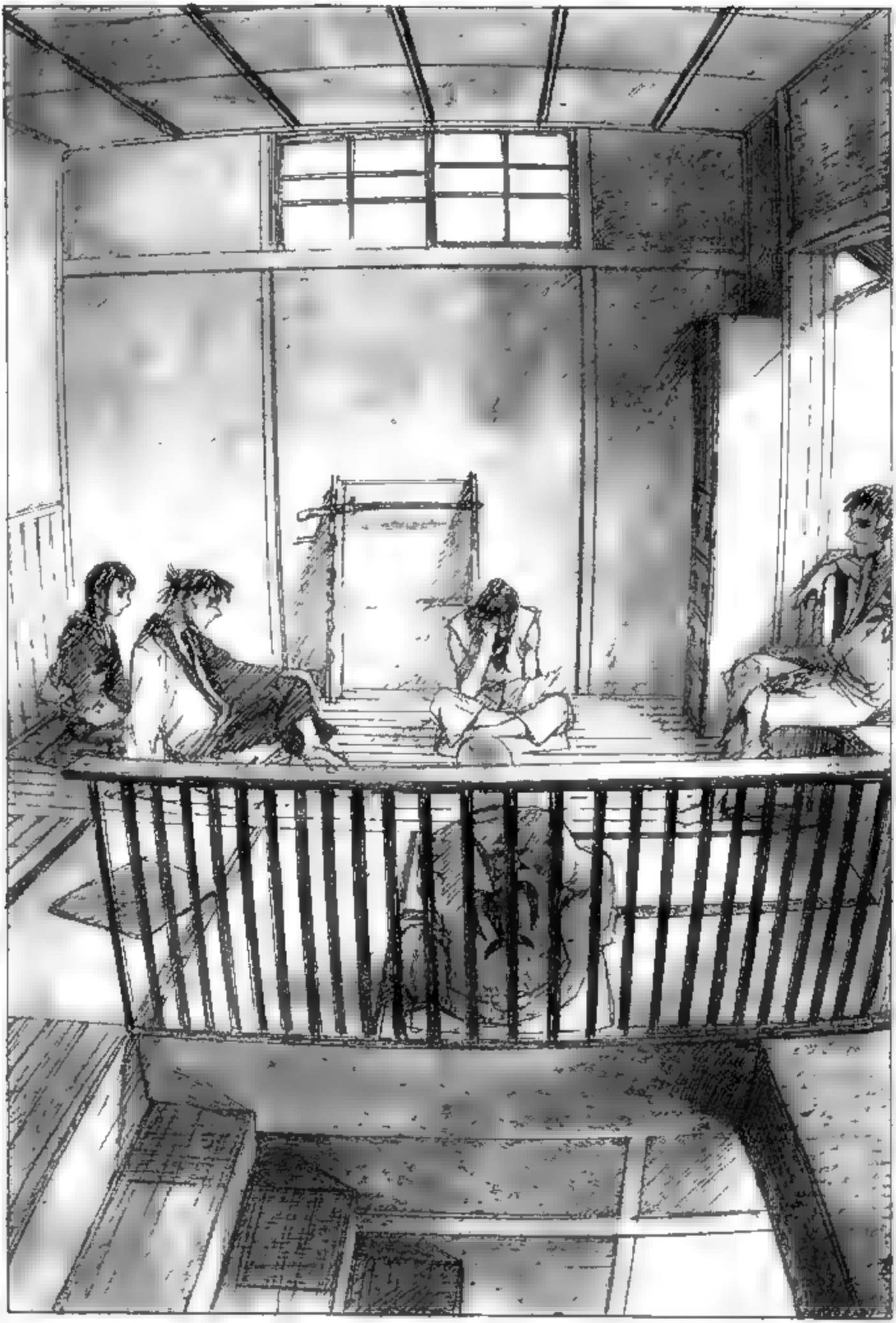
.....
.....
IF I TAKE THAT ONE, THEN I TAKE THAT THERE, AND THERE, AND... NO, NO, WAIT. I TAKE THAT ONE, AN...
HYAKURIN, MA'AM... IF I MIGHT SUGGEST--
SHADDUP!

.....
UM...
IF YOU DO THAT, MA'AM...
...IT'S THE SAME OLD THING. SEE...?
GNPH!!

DON'T YOU SCREW WITH ME, YOU CHEATING LITTLE JERK!
NO, NO, I SWEAR! I MEAN, A SIMPLE GAME LIKE THIS... NOT EVEN FOR MONEY OR NOTHIN'? WH-WHY SHOULD I CHEAT, MA'AM?
THEN WHY CAN'T I WIN EVEN ONCE, GODDAMIT?!
G-GOOD QUESTION, MA'AM...
YO, SHINRIJL
YES, SIR?
AH... THE DOOR?
YOU BETTER NOT TRY AND PULL ANY OF THAT "WIN AND RUN" CRAP, BUDDY!

?!
YOU GUYS LIVE IN A PUBLIC BATH?
YEAH. BUT IT'S CLOSED FOR NOW.

knock
AH, HELLO, SIR. DID--
AT LEAST TAKE DOWN THE DAMN SIGN, YOU IDIOT.
AH? Oh, RIGHT... SORRY, SIR!
ER... WELCOME...
VERY PLEASED TO MEET YOU, SIR.
EH?! Uh... NO, THE P-PLEASURE'S MINE, MISS!



GEE... IT'S SORTA...
...SORTA GRIM IN HERE.
IF I THINK ABOUT IT...
:yawwn:
...ALL THESE GUYS WANT IS MANJI AND HIS ABILIT ES.
THAT'S WHY THEY INVITED HIM RIGHT INTO THEIR HIDEOUT.
AND TO THEM, I'M KINDA LIKE, "WHAT THE HECK IS SHE DOING HERE...?"
AS FAR AS I'M CONCERN-ED...
...THE MORE ALLIES WE HAVE, THE BETTER. BUT EVEN SO... THESE GUYS...

UM...
.....
HUH! LOOK AT 'EM.
FO■ GUYS SITTIN' AROUND, ALL STONE-FACED AND TOUGH-LIKE.
IT'D MAKE ANYONE UNCOMFORT-ABLE, KID!

:koff:
SO... SHALL WE SEAL THE DEAL WITH A DRINK?
IT'S GOOD STUFF, TOO-- STRAIGHT FROM ITAMI.
HERE YOU ARE, MISTER "HUNDRED-MAN KILLER."
LOOK...
...WE AIN'T EVEN DECIDED IF WE'RE WORKING TOGETHER, YET.
SO DON'T YOU GO EXPECTING THIS TO BE "SEALING" NOTHING.
AND SOME PLUM WINE FOR YOU. THAT OKAY?
OH! YES, THANK YOU!

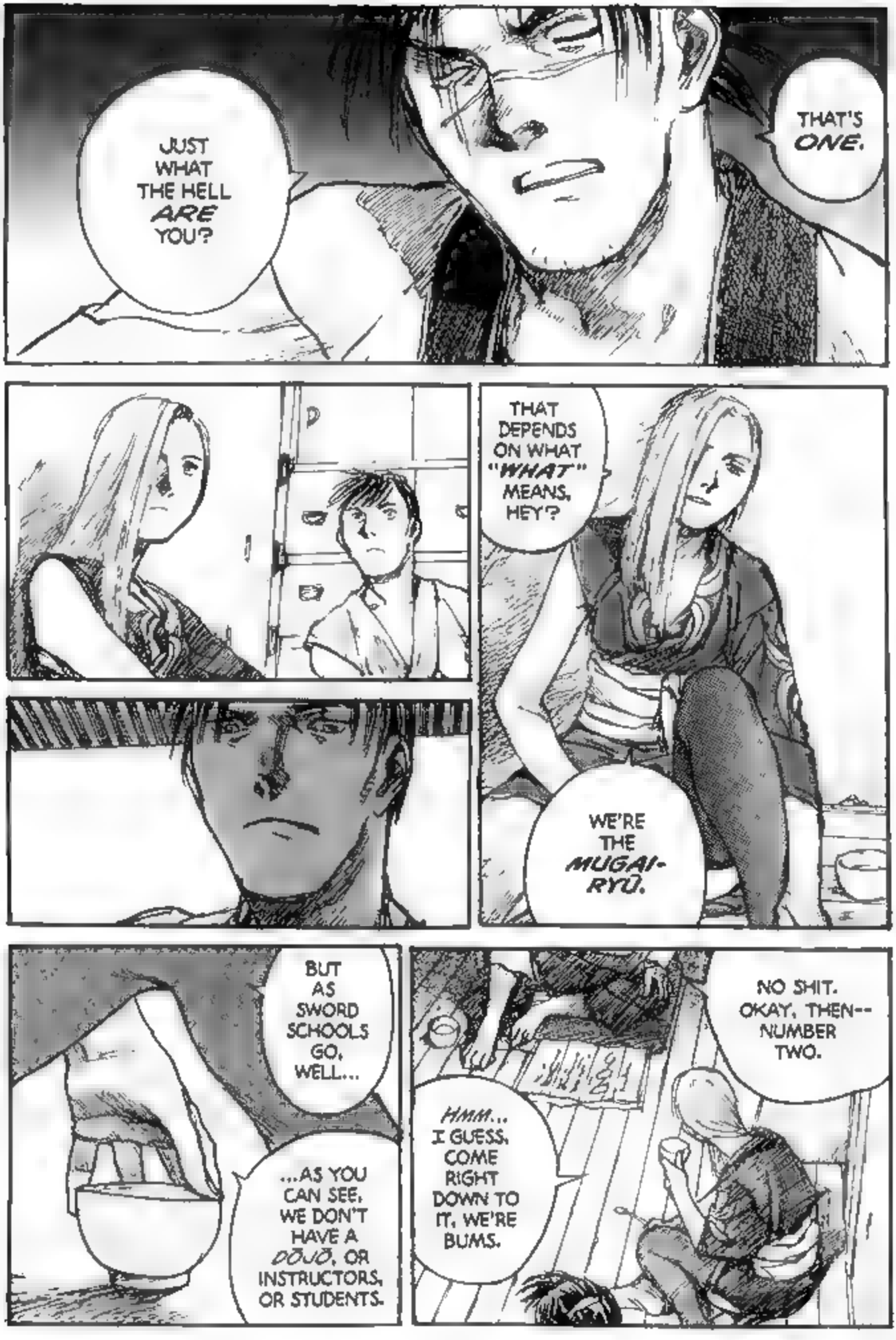
HJH! TIGHT-ASSED BASTARD, AREN'T YOU? STILL, NO MATTER.
THIS STUFF SHOULD LOOSEN YOU UP.
NO CHARGE FOR THE PERSONALIZED POISON TASTING, HON.
.....
.....
HERE.
AH, GREAT.
AND FOR YOU.
MY THANKS.
HERE... YOU, TOO.
DON'T GET ANY BIG IDEAS
HUH?!
BUT... BUT... BUT...
NOW THEN...

C'MON-- GIVE IT BACK.
HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE YOU TO READ A FEW PAGES, ANYWAYS?!
HUH?!
. . . .
. . . . . .
HERE.
THIS IS WHAT WE CAN OFFER YOU IN EXCHANGE FOR THAT SWORD ARM OF YOURS.
GO AHEAD-- LOOK IT OVER FIRST.
WE'LL GET YOUR ANSWER WHEN YOU'RE DONE.

.....
.....

.....
.....

I GOT TWO THINGS I WANT TO ASK.
OKAY, YOU GUYS.


JUST WHAT THE HELL *ARE* YOU?
THAT'S *ONE.*
THAT DEPENDS ON WHAT "*WHAT*" MEANS, HEY?
WE'RE THE *MUGAI-RYŪ.*
BUT AS SWORD SCHOOLS GO, WELL...
...AS YOU CAN SEE, WE DON'T HAVE A *DŌJŌ*, OR INSTRUCTORS, OR STUDENTS.
HMM... I GUESS, COME RIGHT DOWN TO IT, WE'RE BUMS.
NO SHIT. OKAY, THEN-- NUMBER TWO.

THIS STUFF YOU GOT HERE ABOUT ANOTSU GETTING THREE DIFFERENT TRAVEL PASSES IN HIS OWN NAME...
...HIS ROUTE...
...THAT HE'LL HAVE AT LEAST FOUR *KENSHI* WITH HIM...
...AND THE REASON HE'S GOING TO KAGA...
...IS THAT HE'S GOING TO MERGE THE *ITTŌ-RYŪ* WITH ANOTHER *DŌJŌ*.
C'MON! WHAT IS THIS CRAP?
JUST SOME RUMORS...
...YOU BUMS HEARD BLOWING ON THE WIND?

OUR RELATIVE POSITIONS SEEM TO BE SIMILAR...
...MISTER MANJI.
BUT WHEN YOU GET DOWN TO DETAILS...
...WELL, THAT'S WHERE THE DEVIL IS.
THIS IS WHAT MATTERS MOST:
THERE ARE JUST TWO OF YOU...
...AND SIX OF US.
FOUR OF US RIGHT HERE, IN THIS ROOM.
AND AS FOR THE REMAINING TWO, ONE IS PART TIME, AND THE LAST ONE...

WHERE DO YOU THINK HE IS, YOUNG MISS?
HUH?! WELL, Um... Er...
I... I'M JUST GUESSING, BUT...
...I MEAN, IT'S A CRAZY IDEA, BUT--
IF IT'S CRAZY ENOUGH, YOU'RE PROBABLY RIGHT.
HE'S INSIDE THE ITTŌ-RYŪ.

WHAT WE HAVE WRITTEN HERE IS INFORMATION DIRECT FROM OUR MAN.
WE FIGURE A GOOD EI■HTY PERCENT OF IT IS RELIABLE.
EIGHTY PERCENT?!
AN INSIDE JOB SHOULD BE ONE HUNDRED PERCENT.
MANJI.
BY NOW ANOTSU MLST'A HEARD ABOUT IT.
IF HE'S SMART ENOUGH TO WORRY ABOUT AN INFORMER...
...HE MAY EVEN TRY TO SNOW HIS OWN MEN.
SO IF YA THINK ABOUT IT... FIGURE EIGHTY PERCENT, HEY?
I THOUGHT I TOLD YOU YESTER-DAY, MAN!
THAT STUFF ABOUT LS WHACKING A FEW ITTŌ-RYŪ DUDES, HEY?

IN OTHER WORDS, IT'S EIGHTY PERCENT BECAUSE YOU GUYS DIDN'T THINK BEFORE YOU STRUCK.
SHEE-IT... DAMN AMATEURS.
NYA HA HAHA!
WELL, I FIGURE...
...NO USE CRYING OVER SPILT MILK, HUH?
OKAY, THIS THIRD PAGE HERE-- "ASKED TWO OR THREE TIMES TO GO PURCHASE WOMEN'S KIMONO, SASH, AND STRAW SUN HAT."
WHAT'S THAT ALL ABOUT?
OH, YEAH, THAT STUFF.
WE'VE HAD HIM WRITE DOWN EVERYTHING THAT'S HAPPENED AT THE ITTŌ-RYŪ'S HQ, THE TEMPO DŌJŌ, FOR THE PAST COUPLE OF WEEKS...
...NO MATTER HOW SMALL.
IT MAY NOT HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH ANYTHING.
BUT TUCK IT AWAY IN YOUR BRAIN, ANY-HOW.

AND SO...
HOW ABOUT IT, MANJI?
WOMEN'S CLOTHES? I THOUGHT THEY DON'T EVEN HAVE A M.I.P.
MAYBE THEY'RE PRESENTS OR SOMETHING FOR HIS TRIP
A SWAP... OUR INFO FOR YOUR SWORD.
C'MON-- IT'S A SWEET LITTLE DEAL.
YOU KNOW THE ONLY REASONABLE ANSWER.
SO YOU MIGHT AS WELL GIVE IT TO US.

IS THAT ALL?
?
YOU GUYS...

YOU GOTTA PUT ALL YOUR CARDS ON THE TABLE. AIN'T THAT SO?
WHEN YOU ASK SOMEONE TO HELP YOU OUT, FIRST THINGS FIRST.
WELL? DON'T YA THINK SO, SHIRA...?
.....
.....
YOU-- BLONDIE.
THIS SAKE REALLY IS CHOICE.
WAY TOO GOOD FOR A BUNCH OF SELF-CONFESSED "BUMS."

AND THEN...
...THERE'S THIS BUILDING, HERE.
AT FIRST I FIGURED YOU WERE RENTING A ROOM.
BUT, NAW... SHIRA SAYS IT'S CLOSED... "FOR NOW."
AND I CAN SEE IT'S NOT SOME ROTTING OLD DUMP.
WHICH MEANS YOU GUYS PROBABLY OWN IT.
TOUGH FOR A BUNCH OF RŌNIN WITHOUT ANY STUDENTS AND NO WORK I CAN SEE TO BUY A NICE LITTLE HIDEOUT LIKE THIS, EH?
YEAH, IT MUST HAVE BEEN TOUGH, ALL RIGHT.

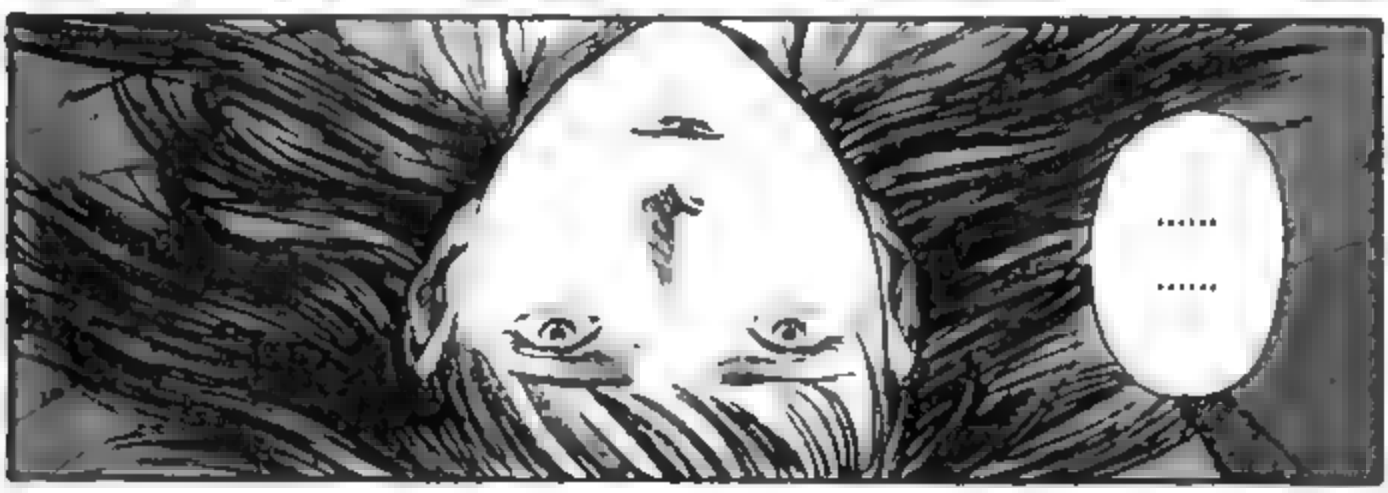
UNLESS, THAT IS... THEY GOT SOMEONE REAL BIG BEHIND THEM.

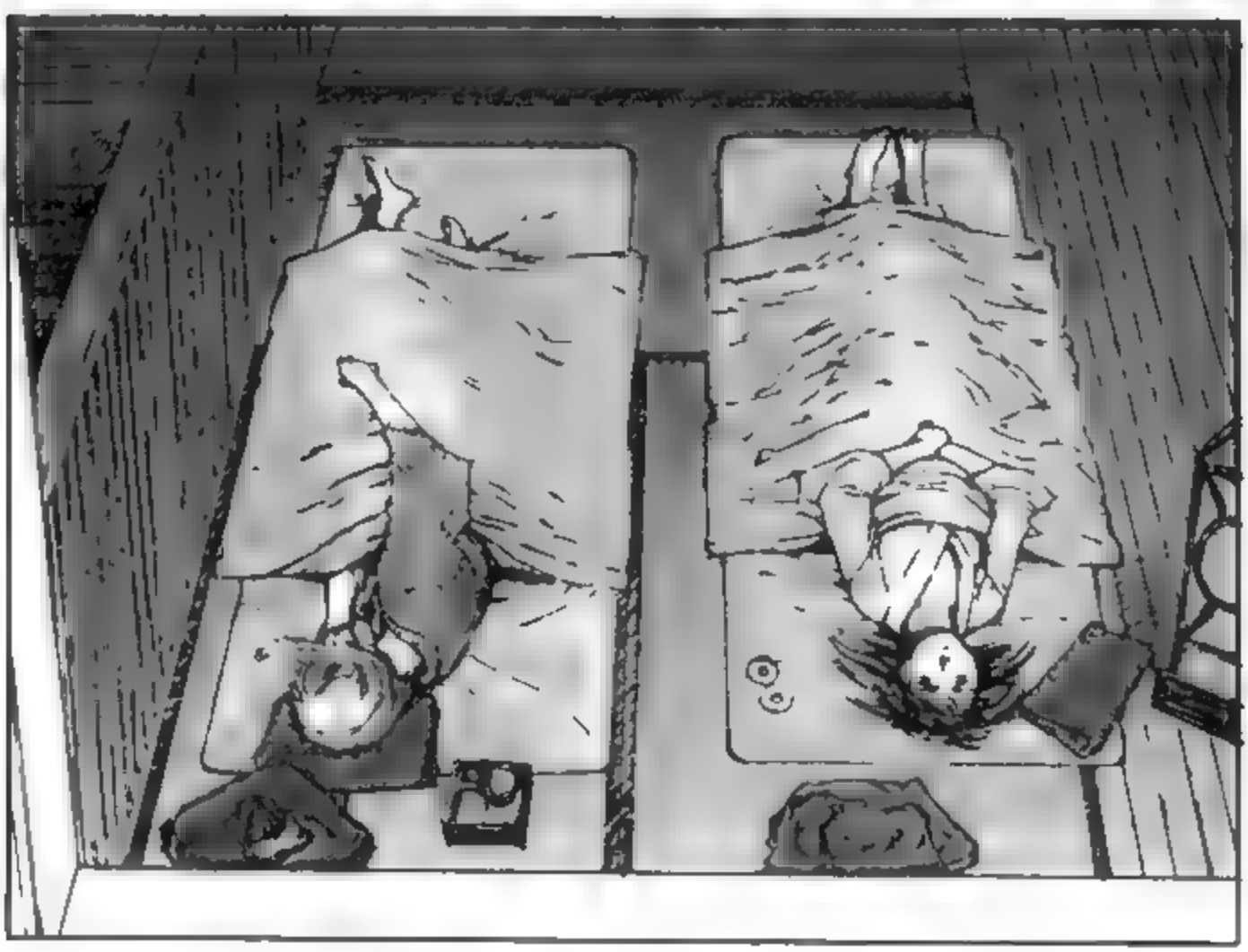
fap
NN!

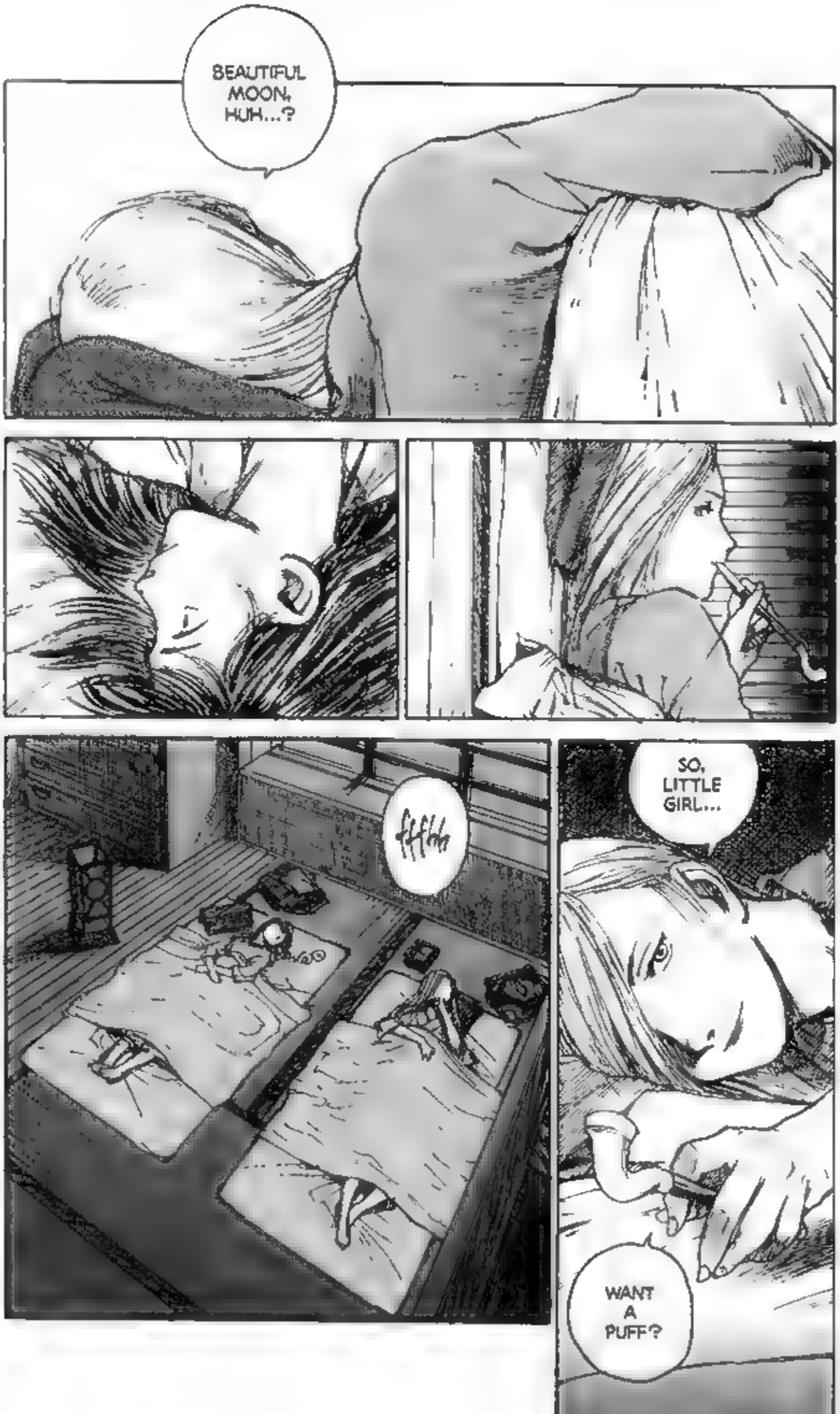
WHAT'S THIS...?
THE BASTARD WHO MURDERED O-REN? THAT'S THE KIMONO HE WAS WEARING.
THREE DAYS AGO, ANY-WAY.
YOU CAN KEEP IT. WHAT YOU DO WITH IT...
...IS YOUR BUSI-NESS.
WHY...? WHY'D YOU LEAVE HER OUT HERE...
...ON THE DIRT?

SHE DESERVED BETTER THAN THIS...
HEY, WE JUST CHOSE THE COLDEST PLACE. THAT'S ALL!
JUST IN CASE SOME DAMN JERK MAYBE FELT LIKE COMING BACK!
BECAUSE WE DIDN'T WANT YOU TO SEE...
...M-HER POOR BODY STARTING TO ROT!
DAMN IT!! IF YOU WEREN'T ALWAYS RUNNING OFF DOING YOUR OWN STUPID CRAP...
...THIS WOULD NEVER HAVE HAPPENED!
POOR O-REN... DAMN IT!
SHE JUST WANTED TO BE WITH YOU, ALWAYS. JUST THAT. NOTHING MORE.

WAS THAT SUCH A BIG, BIG DREAM?! WAS IT SO MUCH TO ASK?! WHAT FUCKING GOOD ARE YOU *KENSHI*, ANYWAY?!
YOU WITH YOUR BIG SWORD AND BIG TALK-- WHAT DID YOU EVER DO FOR HER?!
GIVE A BASTARD A SWORD, AND ALL HE CAN DO IS RUIN PEOPLE'S LIVES!
YOU OF ALL PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW *THAT!* YOU STUPID, PATHETIC FOOL...
SLAM
JUST *GET OUT!*






BEAUTIFUL MOON, HUH...?
SO, LITTLE GIRL...
WANT A PUFF?

MMM... IT MAKES YOU FEEL SO CALM.
PUTS YOU RIGHT TO SLEEP.
MY HANDS AND FEET, GETTING COLDER AND COLDER...
AHHH... IT'S LIKE... IF I COULD DIE LIKE THIS, I'D BE SO HAPPY... SO...
TOTALLY...
HA... .....
.....
.....!

JUST LIKE THAT!
HA, HA! I SEE.
UM... THEN...
MAYBE JUST A PUFF?
NOT YOUR MOUTH-- BREATH IT INTO YOUR LUNGS.
AND THEN COUNT TO FIVE.
AH... OKAY.
WHOOPS! NO, NO, NO...!
ONE...♥

HUHECCH!
HAGCH!
:KOFF:
:KOFF:
:koff:
:kuh:
YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO HOLD IT, HON!
HEH, HEH...
HUH...?!
WELL... FINALLY YOU'RE ONE OF US, MY DEAR.
SORRY, SWEETIE... BUT...
THIS IS HOW WE INITIATE NEW PEOPLE.

IN OTHER WORDS... IF WORST COMES TO WORST...
...THIS WAY WE MAKE SURE WE'VE ALL GOT SOMETHING ON EACH OTHER.
NOW THAT YOU'VE SMOKED THAT, YOU CAN NEVER BETRAY US.
YOU SEE...?
!!
YOU MEAN... THIS...

BWA HAW HAW HAW!
OH, MAN!
FOO FOO
JOKE. JOKE! I'M SORRY.
IT'S JUST PLAIN OL' TOBACCO. HONEST INJUN!
.....
.....
NO, REALLY. I'M SORRY. IT WAS JUST, LIKE...
...YOU'RE SUCH A "GOOD LITTLE GIRL"...
I DUNNO... I COULDN'T RESIST TEASING YOU.
ARE YA MAD AT ME?
UM... NO. NO.

I'M SORRY. MAKING YOU LOOK OUT FOR ME...
MM? YEAH, WELL...
I'M NOT, REALLY
...THINGS TAKE ON A LIFE OF THEIR OWN.
AND I... I JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO.
IT'S JUST...
LIKE, BEFORE I CAN EVEN GET MY HEAD AROUND IT...
YEAH, MUST BE PRETTY SCARY, JOINING UP WITH A BUNCH OF UNKNOWNS LIKE US.
HUH? OH, NO...
THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT.

UM...
....
YEAH...?
THIS AFTER-NOON... WHAT MANJI SAID...?
OH, RIGHT.
THEN...
SORRY!
I CAN'T TELL YOU RIGHT NOW.
YOU KNOW, I THOUGHT HE WAS DUMBER THAN THAT.
I SURE DID.
MAYBE ONCE THIS JOB IS DONE...
...AND WE'VE KNOCKED DOWN THE WALLS BETWEEN US...

THEN I CAN TELL YOU WHO WE REALLY ARE...
AND...
...THE REAL REASON WE'RE AFTER THE ITTŌ-RYŪ.

SOMETIMES I FIND MYSELF THINKING, LIKE...
...THERE ARE THINGS IN THE WORLD YOU DON'T NEED TO KNOW, AND SOME THINGS IT'S BETTER NOT TO KNOW.

AND YOU'RE REALLY YOUNG, BUT YOU'VE GOT SO MUCH PRESENCE...
IT'S JUST, I DUNNO... THE WAY YOU SAID THINGS.

UM, HYAKURIN... ARE YOU, LIKE...
HUH? WHY?
...ARE YOU EVERYONE'S BOSS...?

HA, HA... THANKS. BUT I'VE BEEN AROUND A WHILE, DEAR.
TRY TEN YEARS LONGER THAN YOU.

ACK!
NO WAY!
AND SHE STILL DRESSES LIKE THAT?!
YEAH, I USED TO HAVE A FAMILY.
I EVEN HAD CHILDREN, YOU KNOW... TWO OF THEM.
WOW!
GEE. SO, WHAT ARE YOUR CHILDREN DOING NOW?
HYAKU-RIN...?
TELL ME, RIN.
WHAT'S UP WITH YOU AND THAT GUY?
HUH?!
I MEAN, HOW IS HE IN THE SACK?
WHA--?!
B-BUT... WE...
HE'S TEN YEARS OLDER THAN ME!!
OH, YEAH. RIGHT.
AND WHAT'S YER POINT?

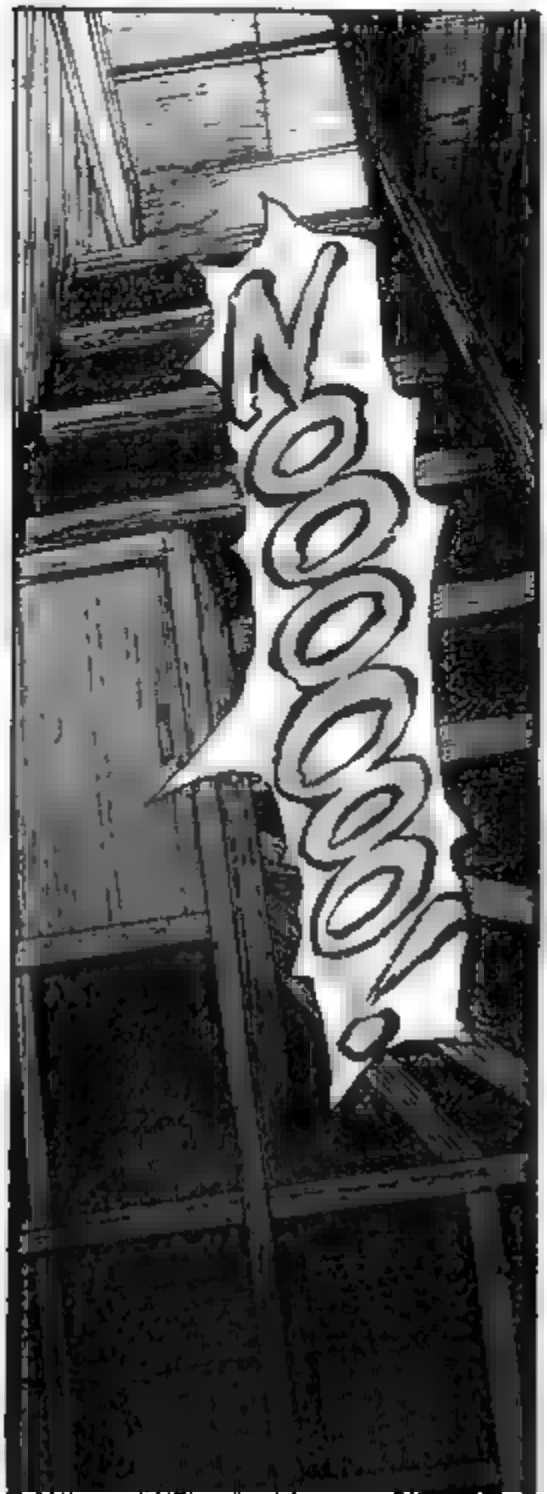
MANJI IS JUST MY BODY-GUARD.
HE'S HELPING ME GET REVENGE.
MY PARENTS. THE ITTŌ-RYŪ...
REVENGE? FOR WHAT?
Ah, I SEE. IT'S PRETTY AWFUL, ISN'T IT? LOSING YOUR FAMILY...
.....
.....
WELL, IF HE'S JUST YOUR BODYGUARD, THEN IT'S NO BIG DEAL.
GOOD!

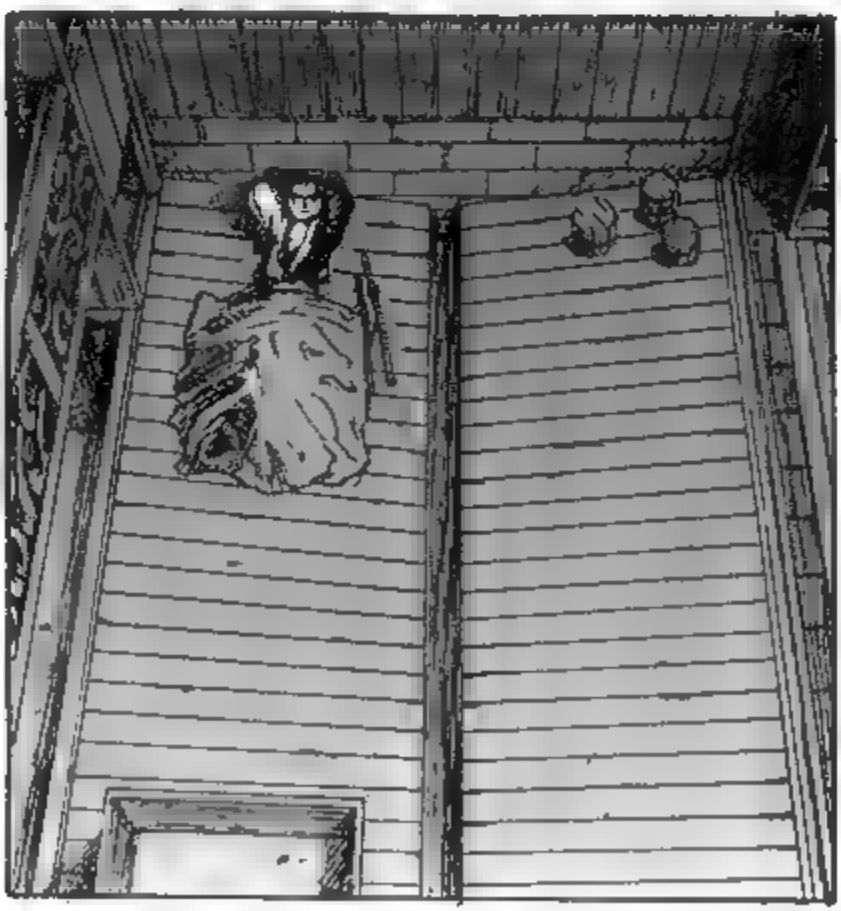
'CAUSE YOU'LL SUFFER FOR YEARS, RIN...
...IF YOU EVER FALL FOR A GUY LIKE THAT.
OH...?
...? B- BUT...
HE... HE'S NOT...
...A BAD MAN.
YEAH, HE LOOKS, YOU KNOW...
...HE LOOKS LIKE THAT.

HE'S ALWAYS GETTING CHOPPED UP...
ALL THAT BLOOD AND PAIN...
HE'S ALWAYS. . HE'S ALWAYS LIKE THAT...
JUST BECAUSE I'M SO WEAK.
BUT I'VE NEVER ONCE SEEN HIM KILL ANYONE WHO WASN'T "ARMED AND DANGER-OUS."
AND THAT "HUNDRED MAN KILLER" STUFF IS TRUE, I GUESS.
LISTEN UP, KID.

IF YOU'RE ALWAYS BEING PROTECTED THAT WAY BY SOME TOUGH GUY...
...YOU'RE NEVER GOING TO BE STRONG *YOURSELF.* RIGHT?
YEAH, WELL, WHAT-EVER.
C'MON-- TIME TO HIT THE SACK.

NO!
NO!!


NOOOOO!!

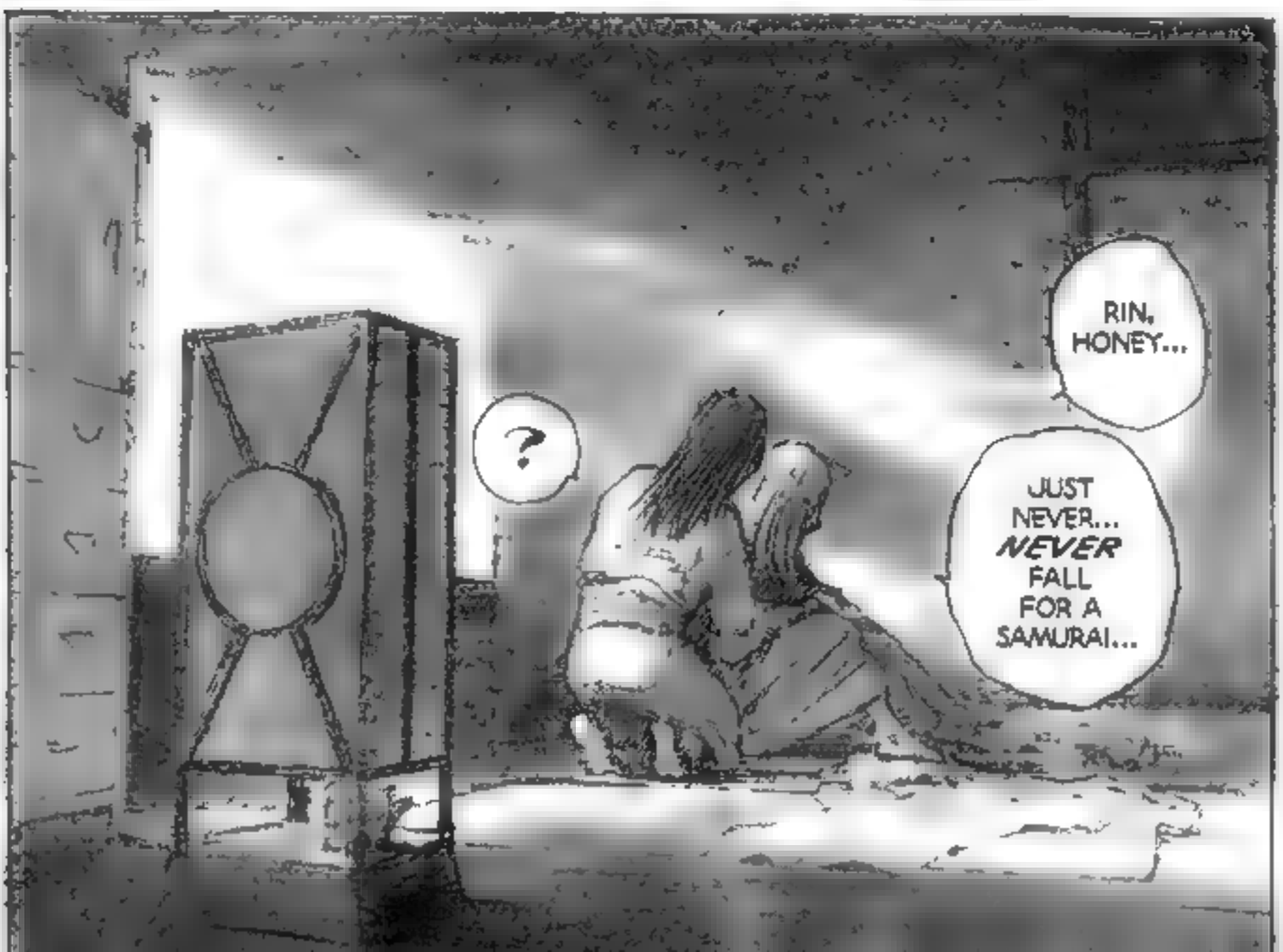


FORGET IT.
!
IT'S JUST... HER LITTLE PROBLEM.

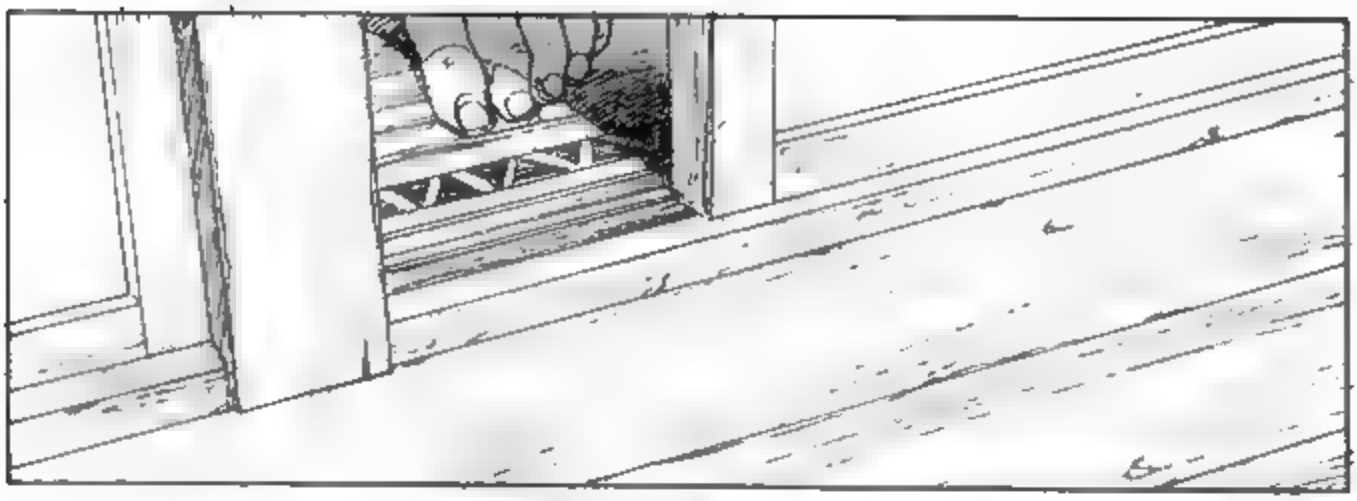
Aw!
HYAKU-RIN!
AAH!
CHHH
Sob
...
...
...
huff

D-DON'T WORRY. THIS JUST HAPPENS... SOME-TIMES...
I... I'M SORRY.

WAS IT... A BAD DREAM?


?
RIN, HONEY...
JUST NEVER... NEVER FALL FOR A SAMURAI...

HELLO? IT'S ABOUT THAT TIME.
ARE YOU ALMOST READY?
.....
SHKK
EXCUSE ME...
AH?!
OOPS! ... I'M SORRY!
S- SORRY ABOUT THAT!
SHKK



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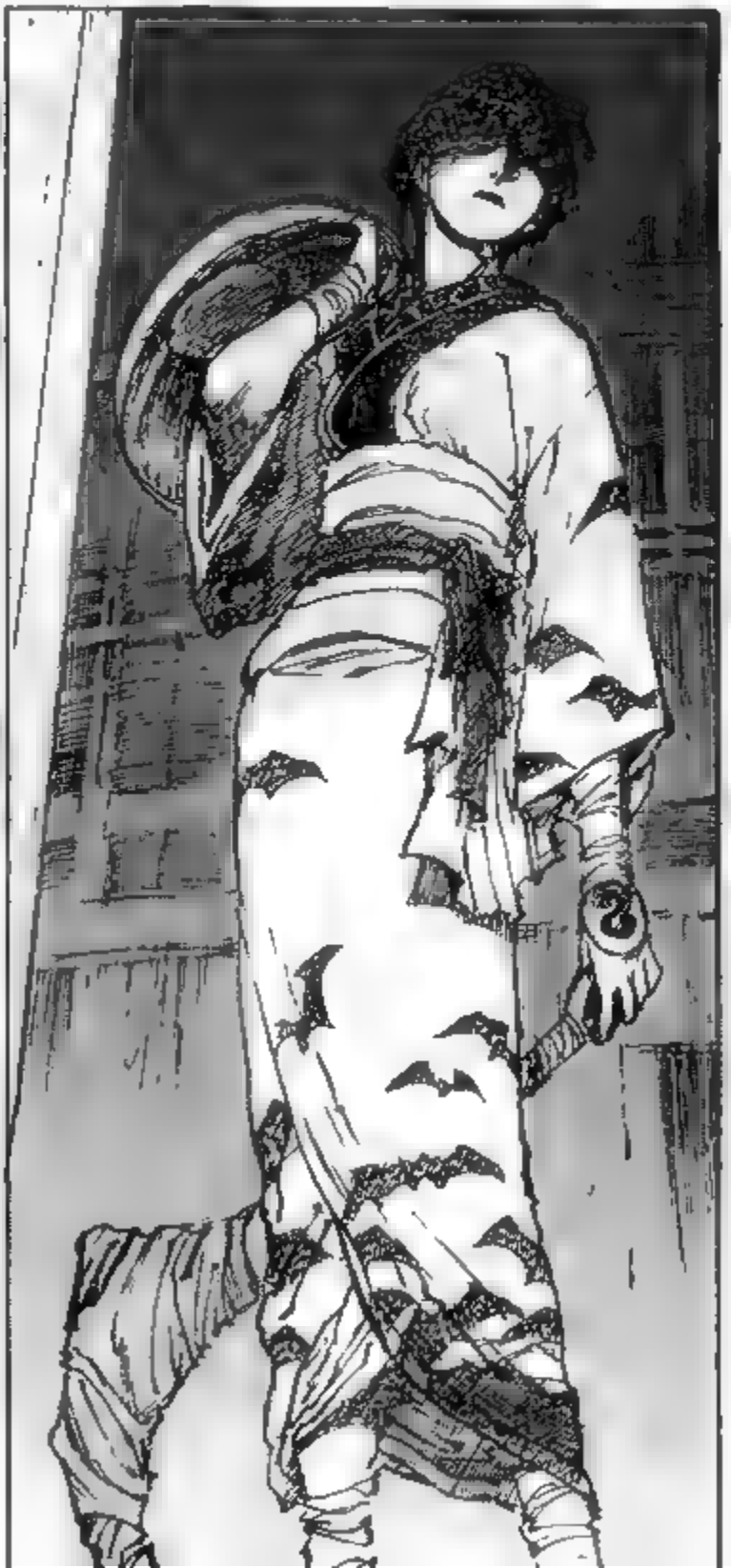
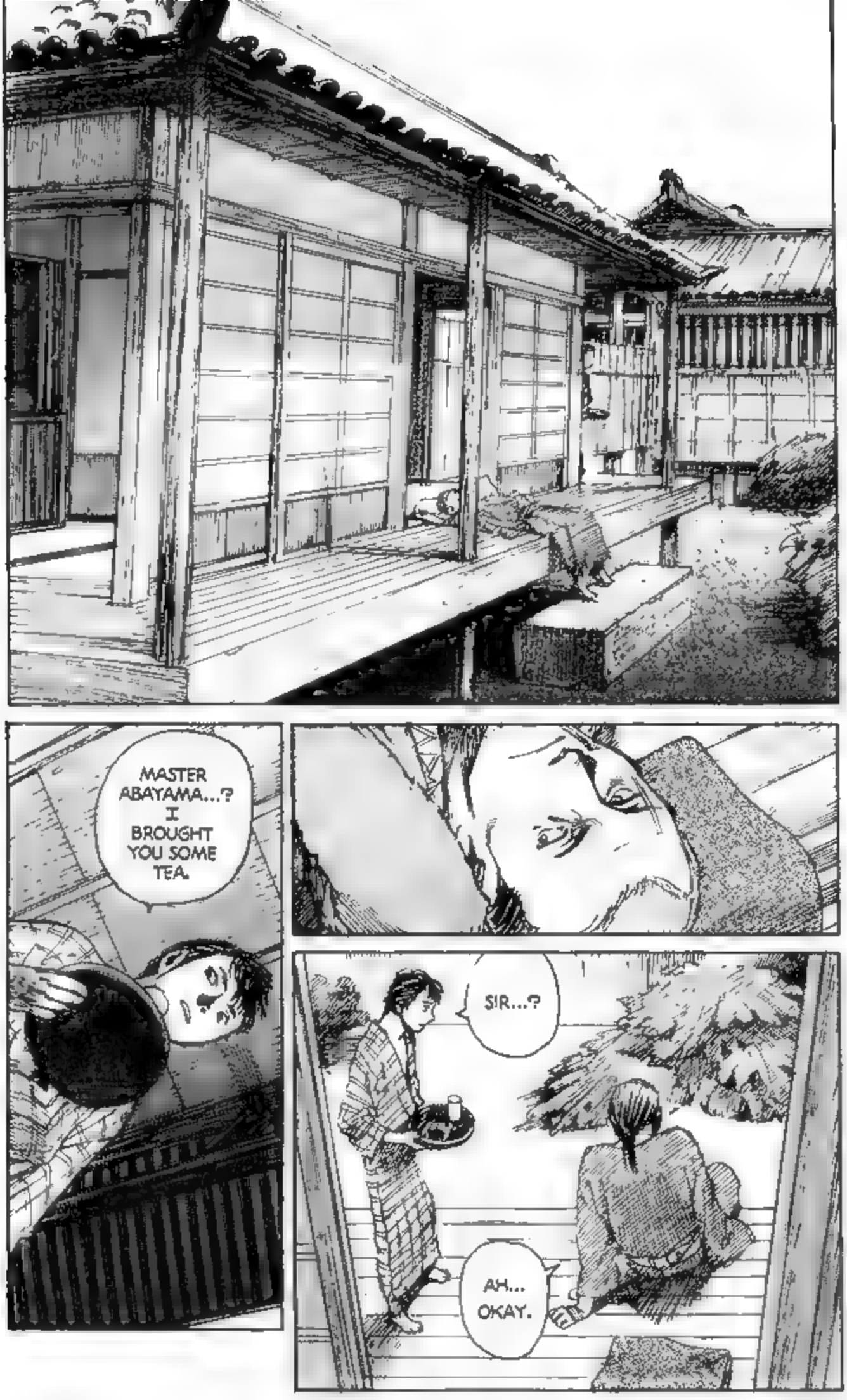


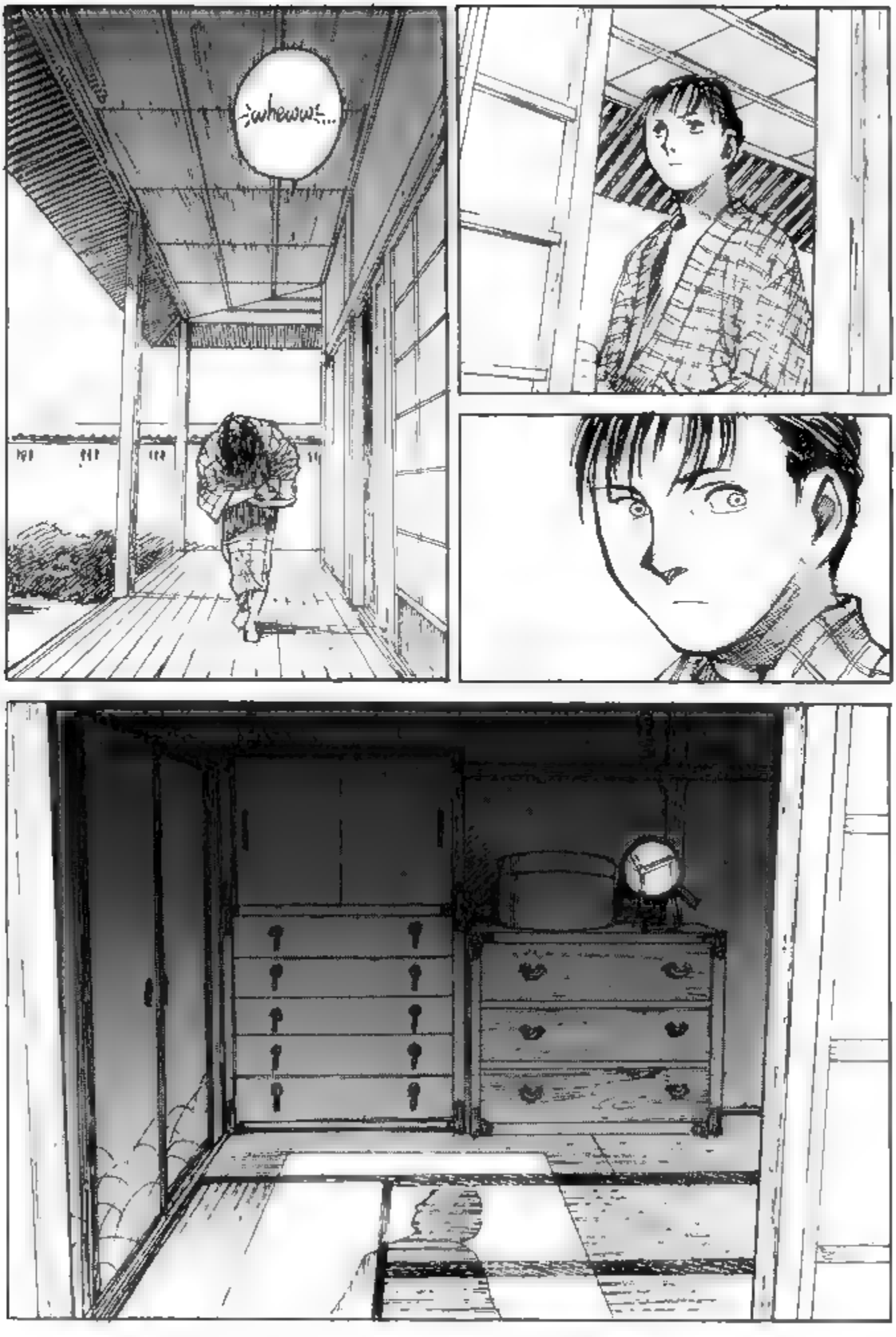
WELL, WELL!

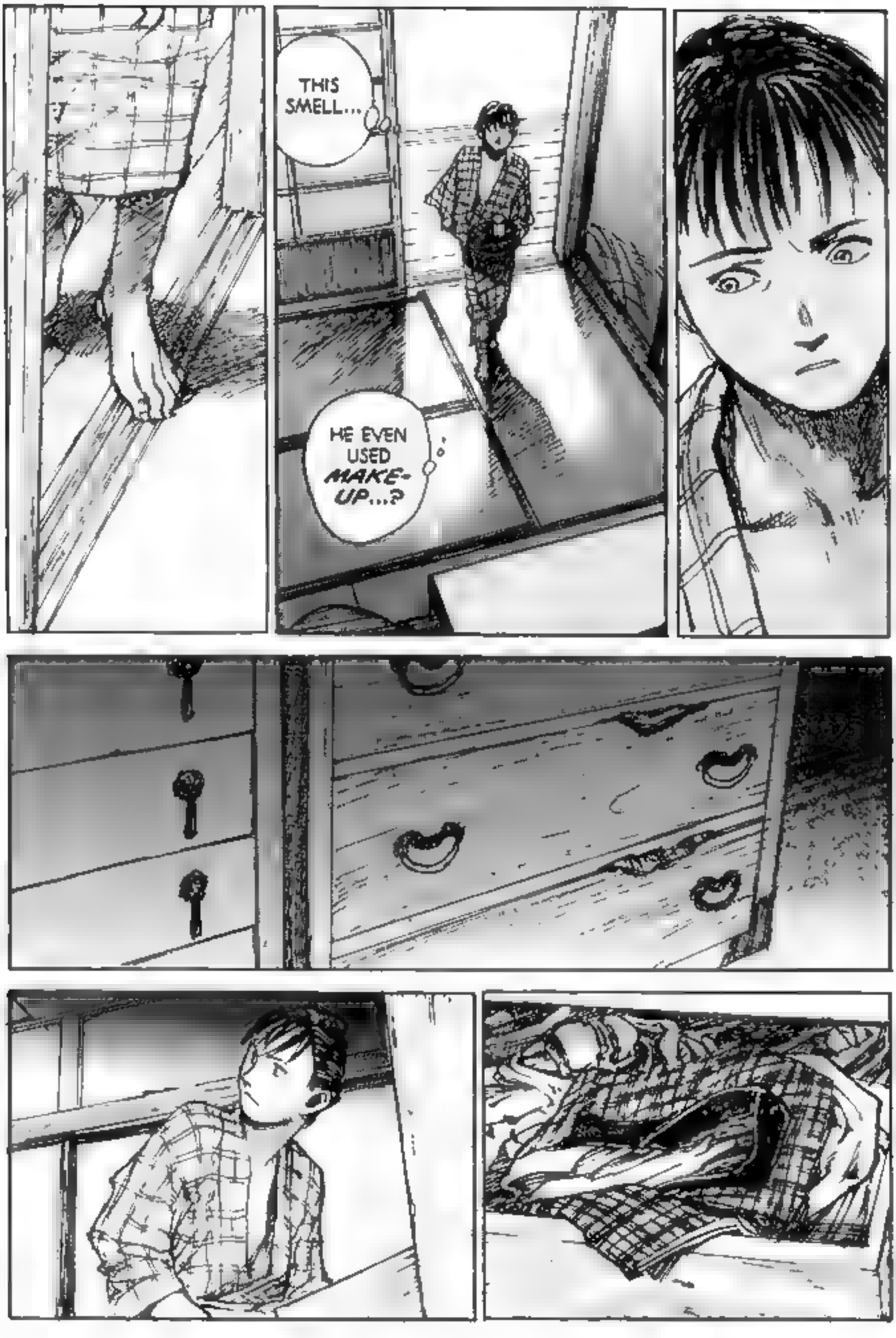
HEART OF DARKNESS
Part 2


MASTER ABAYAMA...? I BROUGHT YOU SOME TEA.
SIR...?
AH... OKAY.

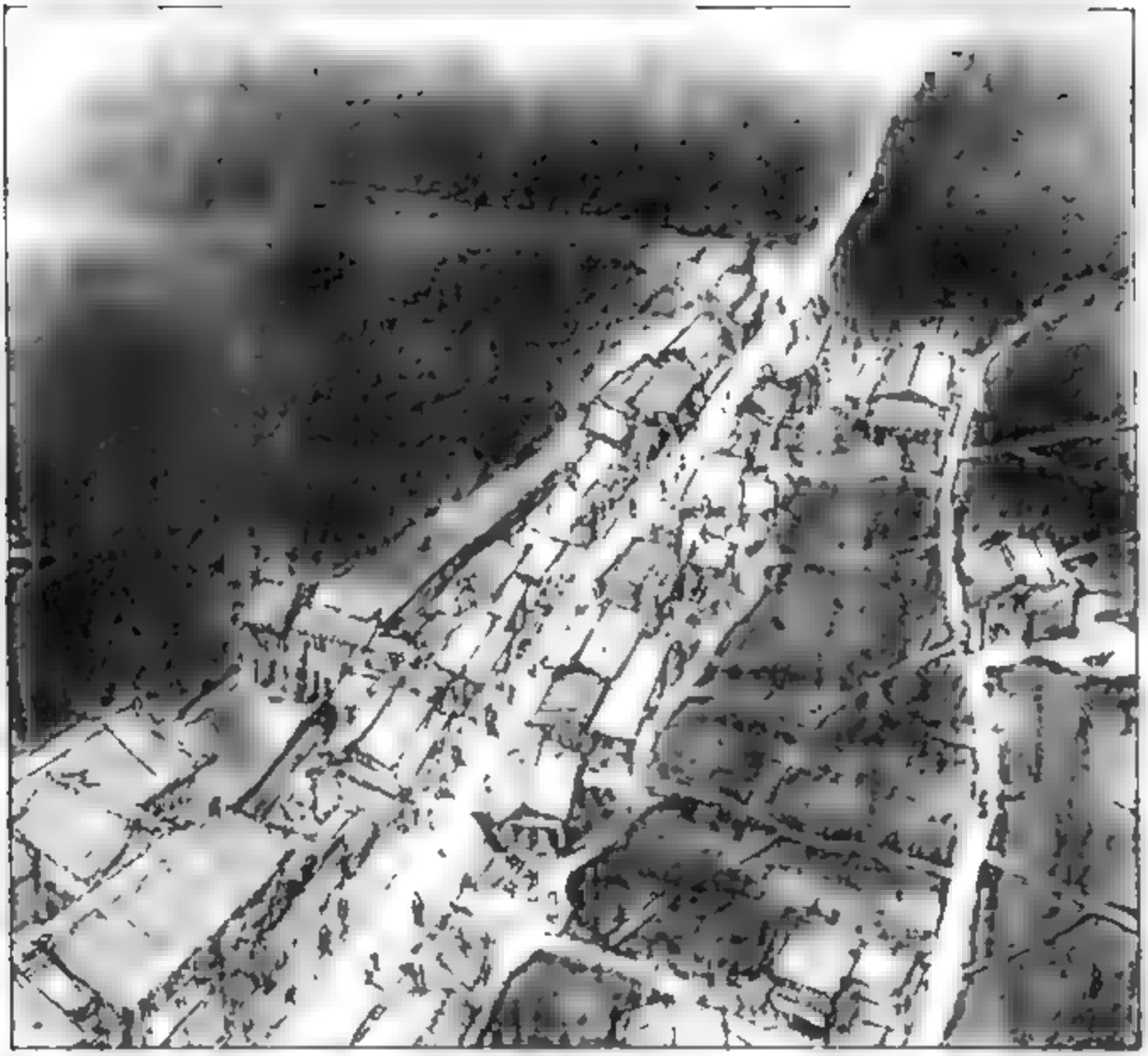
ER... DON'T YOU LIKE TEA, SIR?
I DIDN'T SAY THAT, BOY.
IT'S JUST THAT... NIBBLING AT THESE YŌKAN SWEETS OR THE LIKE...
AND SIPPING MY TEA ON THE VERANDA...
HOW DOES THAT MAKE ME FEEL, EH? LIKE A WEATHER-BEATEN OLD GEEZER, THAT'S HOW.
I MAY LOOK LIKE THIS, MAKOTO LAD, BUT I'M STILL ONLY SIXTY YEARS OLD.
WELL, EARLY SIXTIES, ANYWAY
WOW... THAT'S SUPPOSED TO BE LIKE... YOUNG?
STILL, THOUGH... WHEN I SEE THAT LITTLE WIMP OF A KID MY OLD FRIEND ANOTSU SABURŌ LEFT IN MY CARE...
...AND THERE HE IS, RUNNING THE WHOLE ITTŌ-RYŪ... I THINK TO MYSELF--MAYBE THE TIME'S COME FOR ME TO RETIRE AT LAST.
NOW THAT YOU MENTION IT, DID THE BOSS...?
YEAH. THIS MORNING.

SO, UM... WERE THEY REALLY FOR HIM TO DRESS UP IN?
THOSE KIMONO I BOUGHT, I MEAN?
YEAH.
HIS OWN IDEA.
BY THE WAY, SON...
I DIDN'T SEE YOU AROUND THIS MORNING.
HUH? OH, THAT.
I WENT DOWN TO UMEYA'S TO ORDER MORE OIL.
THAT WASN'T THE GREATEST TIMING, YOU KNOW.
IT WAS DAMN CRAZY AROUND HERE, GETTING EVERYONE READY TO GO.
YES, SIR. SORRY, SIR.

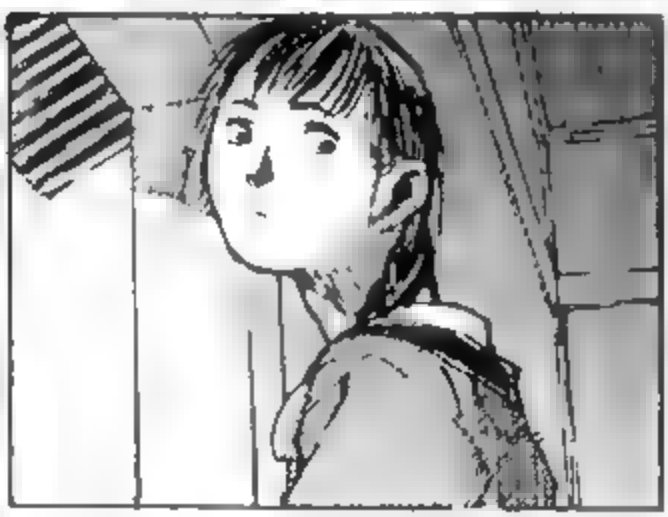

~whewww~...


THIS SMELL...
HE EVEN USED MAKE-UP...?

.....?
STRANGE.
WHY ARE THERE STILL WOMEN'S CLOTHES...?



SO THIS IS NAITO SHINJUKU. HMM?



SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE WE'VE WALKED ALL OVER EVERY-WHERE.
BUT I GUESS, EVEN NOW...
...WE'VE NEVER LEFT EDO, NOT EVEN ONCE.
HAVE WE...?
SHEESH... LOOK AT HIM. HOW CAN ANYONE...
...SLEEP SO MUCH?

...!?
WOO AH!
EEK!
FWD
.....
.....

WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU DOING?!
Uh... ER...
IT'S LIKE...
JUST CLEANING YOUR EARS, Y'KNOW? LIKE THIS?
FEELS GOOD!
YOU WOKE ME UP FOR THAT?
I'M SORRY! BUT, um... SINCE YOU'RE UP, GOT A SEC?
JUST A SEC!
I MEAN, IT'S STILL LIGHT OUT, AND... AND...
CAN WE...um... TALK A BIT?

BEING HERE ALL ALONE... GETS TO ME.
HA HA
.....
.....
OKAY, GO AHEAD. BUT DON'T GET GROSSED OUT BY WHAT YOU FIND.
HA, HA HA...?
EARWIGS, MAYBE?
NO PROBLEM-- MAKES IT WORTH THE DIG!

RIN.
WHAT ARE YOU SO JITTERY ABOUT.
ME?
YOU'RE AFRAID, RIGHT?
OF MEETING ANOTSU.
Y... YES.
VERY.
IT'S NOT THAT I'M REALLY AFRAID OF HIM, BUT...

MANJI? I THINK I'VE FIGURED OUT HOW TO CONQUER THEM.
MY WEAK-NESSES, I MEAN.
WELL, THE STUFF IN MY HEAD, ANYWAY.
Hmm
MY SWORD WORK... WELL. heh, heh...
STILL NOT QUITE THERE, YET.
OW!
SO. THE NEXT TIME I MEET THAT MAN...?
OKAY.. OTHER EAR
I'LL BE READY TO CUT HIM DOWN LIKE A REED.
I THINK, ANYWAY. BUT I WONDER IF YOU OR SHIRA ARE GOING TO BEAT ME TO IT...
...THIS TIME...

SHIT. NOT THIS CRAP AGAIN!
HN?
WHAT DID THOSE GUYS PUT INTO YOUR HEAD?
THIS IS ENTIRELY OF MY OWN FREE WILL, IF YOU DON'T MIND! HUPH!
OH, YEAH? BY THE WAY... THAT WOMAN, WHAT'S 'ER NAME...
THAT SCREAM LAST NIGHT...
WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT ABOUT?
YOU MEAN HYAKU-RIN, RIGHT?
I DON'T REALLY KNOW, EITHER.
DID SHE SAY ANY-THING?
UH-HUH. SHE JUST SAID...

THUD
HEH HEH HEH
NO, NO-- DON'T GET UP!
CHECK THIS OUT, MANJI!
AARG.. BUSTED!
WELL, WELL, WELL!
NOW AIN'T THIS A SWEET TABLEAU!

SINCE YOU CAN'T WAIT OUTSIDE. NOT WHEN THEY KNOW WHAT YOU LOOK LIKE...
LET'S WATCH IN COMFORT, HEY? POP THE CORK AND HAVE A FEW SWIGS.
THIS'LL GO DOWN A LOT BETTER THAN THE RAT PISS THEY SERVE HERE.
THAT, AND ONE MORE THING.
I HEARD A PRETTY FUNNY STORY ABOUT ANOTSU.
FROM OUR "FRIEND" INSIDE. FIRST THING THIS MORNING...

HEART OF DARKNESS
Part 3

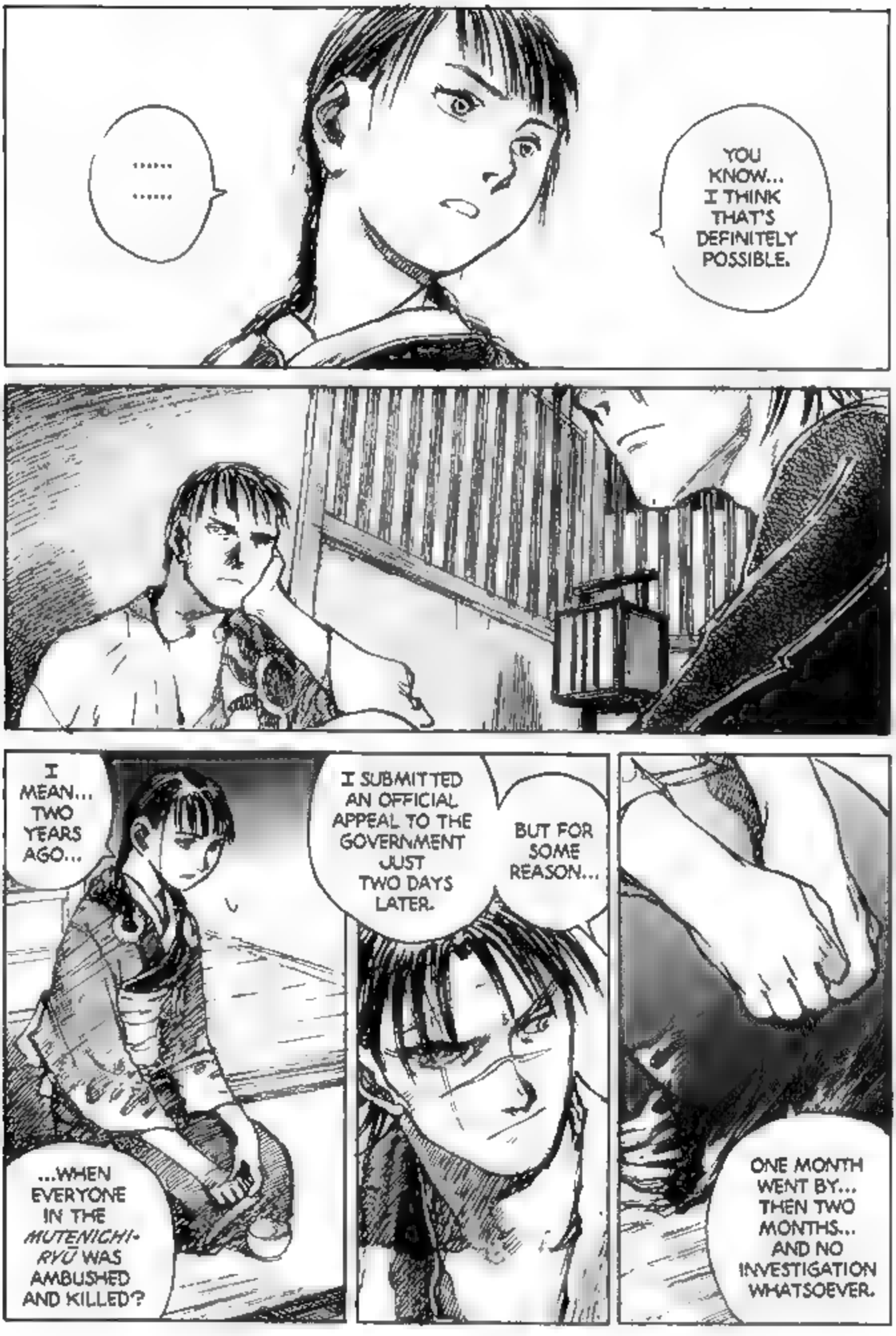
HE'S IN DRAG...?
THAT'S PRETTY OUT THERE.
YEAH... SORTA CREEPY, HUH? BUT IF WE HADN'T HEARD ABOUT IT...
...IT COULD HAVE REALLY THROWN US OFF THE SCENT.

WHEN I READ THAT REPORT ABOUT THOSE KIMONOS AND STUFF...
...I *THOUGHT* SOMETHING WAS KINDA FISHY.
BUT, Y'KNOW, MANJI... IT DOES MAKES THINGS A *WEE* BIT MORE DIFFICULT.
IF THE HEAD OF THEIR WHOLE FREAKIN' SCHOOL IS ACTING THAT WEIRD...
...THERE AIN'T NO TELLIN' WHAT THE REST OF THEM'LL DO.
IF WE JUST GOT FIVE *KENSHI* WALKIN' DOWN THE ROAD... NO PROBLEM, EH?
BUT IF *ALL* OF THEM GET DRESSED UP... THEN HELL, WE MIGHT AS WELL QUIT RIGHT NOW.

HUH?
C'MON, KIDDO-- NO PROBLEM!
I ONLY SPLASHED IN 'BOUT AS MUCH AS A SPARROW'S PISS, HEY?
AH...? OH...
YO, SHIRA.
THAT IDEA DON'T MAKE A GODDAMN LICK OF SENSE.
IF HE JUST WANTS TO SHAKE OFF ASSASSINS, THEN SURE, WHY NOT DRAG?

DE-ONNA: A WOMAN LEAVING EDO. SEE GLOSSARY.

BUT IF HE'S GONNA BE A *DE-ONNA*...
MAN, HE COULDN'T PICK A ***WORSE WAY*** TO GET THROUGH THE *SEKISHO* CHECK-POINTS.
YEAH.
YOU GOT A POINT.
BUT, MANJI... THIS INFO IS ***SOLID***, NOT JUST A BUNCH OF RUMORS.
SO UNLESS HE CHANGES SOMEWHERE ALONG THE WAY... IT LEAVES JUST TWO POSSIBILITIES.
BREACH THE *SEKISHO* BY FORCE...
...OR USE CONNECTIONS INSIDE THE *BAKUFU*.
PERIOD.

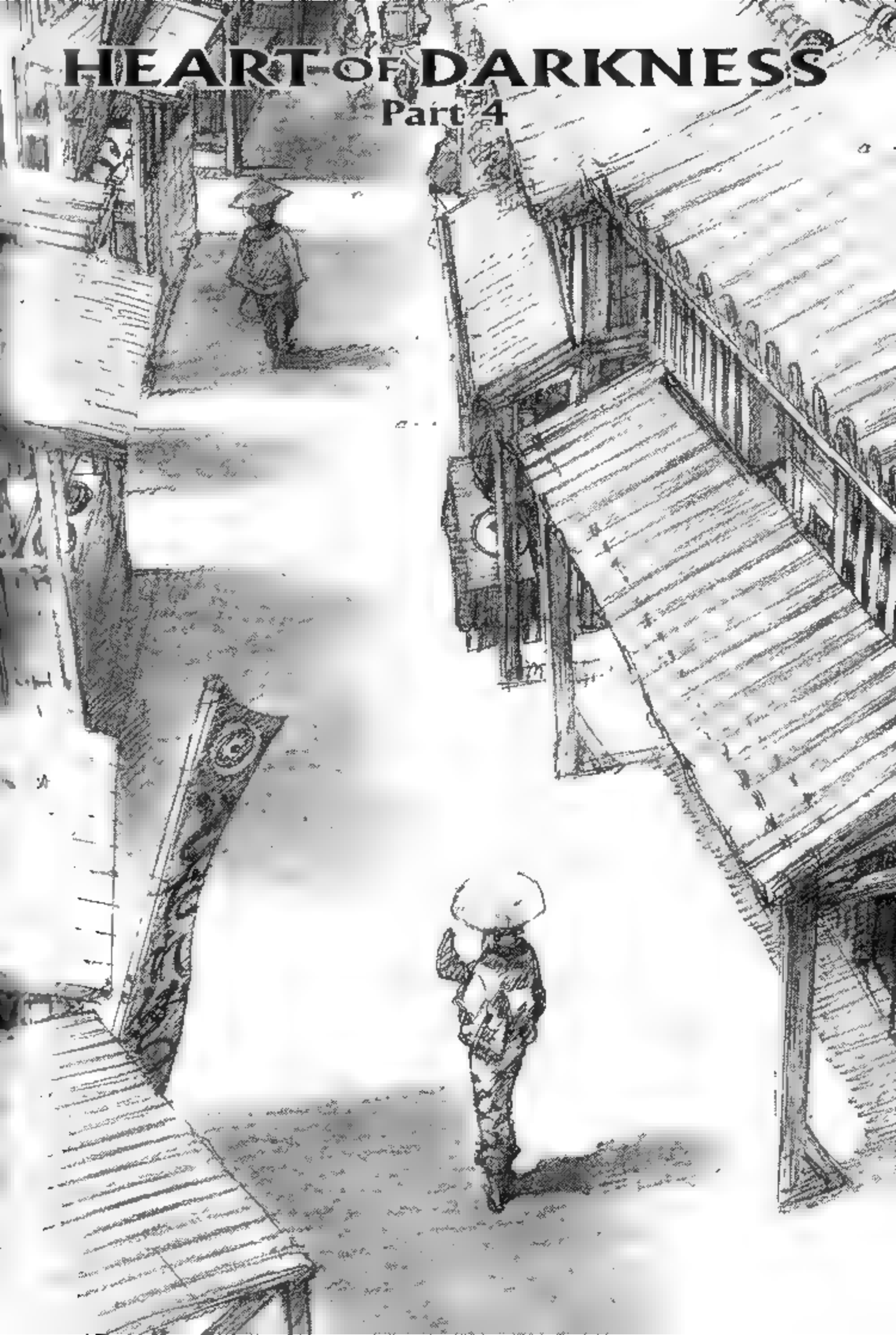

.....
.....
YOU KNOW... I THINK THAT'S DEFINITELY POSSIBLE.
I MEAN... TWO YEARS AGO...
...WHEN EVERYONE IN THE *MUTENICHI-RYŪ* WAS AMBUSHED AND KILLED?
I SUBMITTED AN OFFICIAL APPEAL TO THE GOVERNMENT JUST TWO DAYS LATER.
BUT FOR SOME REASON...
ONE MONTH WENT BY... THEN TWO MONTHS... AND NO INVESTIGATION WHATSOEVER.

AND LATER, WHEN I WENT TO THE BUGYŌSHŌ TO NOTIFY THEM THAT I WOULD BE SEEKING REVENGE...
...I GOT THE TOTAL RUNAROUND, AND THEY NEVER DID GIVE ME PERMISSION, EVEN THOUGH I COMPLIED WITH ALL THE RED TAPE.
THAT'S WHY MY ADA-UCHI VENDETTA ISN'T OFFICIALLY REGISTERED BY A HANTEI-JO.
AND NORMALLY THESE THINGS AREN'T A PROBLEM... ARE THEY?
SO I'VE WONDER-ED...
...IF THE ITTŌ-RYŪ DIDN'T HAVE SOME TIES WITH THE BAKUFU BACK THEN... SOMEWHERE BE-HIND THE SCENES. OR IF THE BAKUFU ITSELF...
.....
.....
...PLANNED TO TAKE ITTŌ-RYŪ INTO THE FOLD AT SOME POINT, AND WAS DELIBERATELY TURNING A BLIND EYE.
IT'S NOT COMPLETELY IMPOSSIBLE... IS IT?

YOU SAID YOU'VE SEEN ANOTSU KAGEHISA, RIGHT...?
WELL? RIGHT?
UM... Y-YES.
JUST THAT DAY TWO YEARS AGO?
NO... ACTUALLY, ONCE MORE-- JUST A FEW DAYS AGO.
MANJI... SAVE THE REST OF THAT SAKE.
WE'RE GONNA NEED IT REAL SOON...
...FOR OUR VICTORY CELEBRA-TION!

HEART OF DARKNESS

Part 4



THERE.
SOME PICKLES AND ANYTHING ELSE?
UM.. NO. THAT'S ALL.
THANKS!

*: COMPANIONS GETTING TOGETHER TO VISIT TEMPLES OR TAKE IN THE SIGHTS.
?!
LOOK... NOT LIKE I'M SUSPICIOUS OR NOTHING, BUT...
EVEN FOR KÔ* AND PLAIN OLD TOURIST STUFF...
...PRETTY MUCH NO ONE EVER STAYS IN SHINJUKU FOR MORE'N ONE NIGHT.
AND NO ONE EVER COMES DOWN TO THE KITCHEN FOR THEIR FOOD!
OH! OH, REALLY...? I... I'M SORRY!
HA, HA, HA! NOTHING TO BE SORRY ABOUT, GIRL. MORE THAT I'M GRATEFUL, LIKE.
LOOKS LIKE I'LL GET BY WITHOUT SERVICING THOSE MEN OF YOURS.
SPLOSH
EVEN AT THE BEST OF TIMES WE MESHIMORI-ONNA DON'T SPEND MUCH TIME IN THE KITCHEN...
...IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN. BUT IN THIS DUMP THEY EXPECT US TO TAKE CUSTOMERS ON THE SLY.
...?
.....
.....

*: FOUR LODGING AREAS BETTER KNOWN AS UNOFFICIAL RED-LIGHT DISTRICTS.
#: ALL RED LIGHT DISTRICTS IN EDO OTHER THAN THE YOSHIWARA.

YOU COME DOWN TO IT, THE SHI-SHUKU* ARE ALL OKABASHO#.
RIGHT, GIRL?
OH... IS THAT SO? I...
WHAT?!
AH... I DIDN'T...
NEITHER OF THEM SAID ANY-THING ABOUT...
....
....
WAA HAHA HA!
THERE WASN'T A SINGLE CALL FOR ME, SO I JUST THOUGHT...
...WELL, DEAR, I THOUGHT YOU'D BEEN DOING THE BOTH OF THEM! AH HA HA!
WELL, IN THAT CASE, GIRL, THAT MEANS...
...THEY'RE BEHAVIN' THEMSELVES ON ACCOUNT OF YOU? OH, THOSE TWO POOR GUYS!

AH, WELL, WHATEVER. EVEN IF THEY DID CALL FOR ME...
B BUT IT ISN'T I'M N- NOT
...I'D PROBABLY HAVE TO TURN 'EM DOWN.
DON'T KNOW IF I COULD HANDLE TAKING ON THOSE TWO TOUGH BASTARDS!
I... I SEE. .....?
WHY'S THAT?
SO ANYWAY, THAT'S WHY I WAS SO CURIOUS, LIKE. THEY WASN'T BUYING ANY WOMEN...
...SO, "WHAT'RE THEY UP TO?" Y'KNOW?
SOME-THING... NAUGHTY, HMM?
HELL, NOT THAT IT MATTERS.
NO, I PROMISE WE WON'T CAUSE ANY... ANY...
UM...
CAN I... ASK YOU SOME-THING?

HAVE YOU EVER GONE THROUGH THE KOBOTOKE CHECK-POINT?
HUH?
THE *SEKISHO*? WELL, YEAH. JUST ONCE.
I HEAR LOTS ABOUT IT, THOUGH... ON ACCOUNT OF MY WORK, SEE?
OH. THEN, *UM*, IT'S JUST SORT OF A...A "WHAT IF?" QUES-TION...
BUT...
WHAT IF, JUST FOR EXAMPLE... THERE WAS A GUY WHO LIKE, REALLY LIKED DRESSING UP LIKE A WOMAN OR SOMETHING, AND THAT PERSON...
...WAS LIKE, DRIVEN BY SOME SORT OF, ■ DUNNO, ***PERVERSE DESIRE*** TO GO THROUGH THE *SEKISHO* ALL DRESSED UP?
I MEAN, HA-HA, OF COURSE THERE WOULDN'T BE ANYTHING ***MORE*** SUSPICIOUS THAN ***THAT***...
...BUT IF HE INSISTED ON DOING IT ANYWAY... IS THERE, LIKE, EVEN ***ONE WAY*** TO PULL IT OFF... YOU THINK?

WELL?
OKAY .. WHICH ONE IS IT?
HUH?
JUST, Uh, THEORET-ICALLY, OKAY?
OH, NO, NO! IT'S NOT ABOUT THEM. I'M JUST MAKING IT UP!
HMM...
THANK GOD, I DIDN'T WANT TO IMAGINE ONE OF THOSE GUYS
HOW ABOUT IF YOU HAD A CONTACT INSIDE THE GOVERN-MENT OR SOME-THING...?
DON'T UNDER-ESTIMATE THOSE GOVERN-MENT GUYS.
...I FIGURE ANY OLD SEKISHO WOULD NOTICE SOMETHING LIKE THAT!
DON'T RIGHTLY KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GETTING AT. BUT, GIRL...

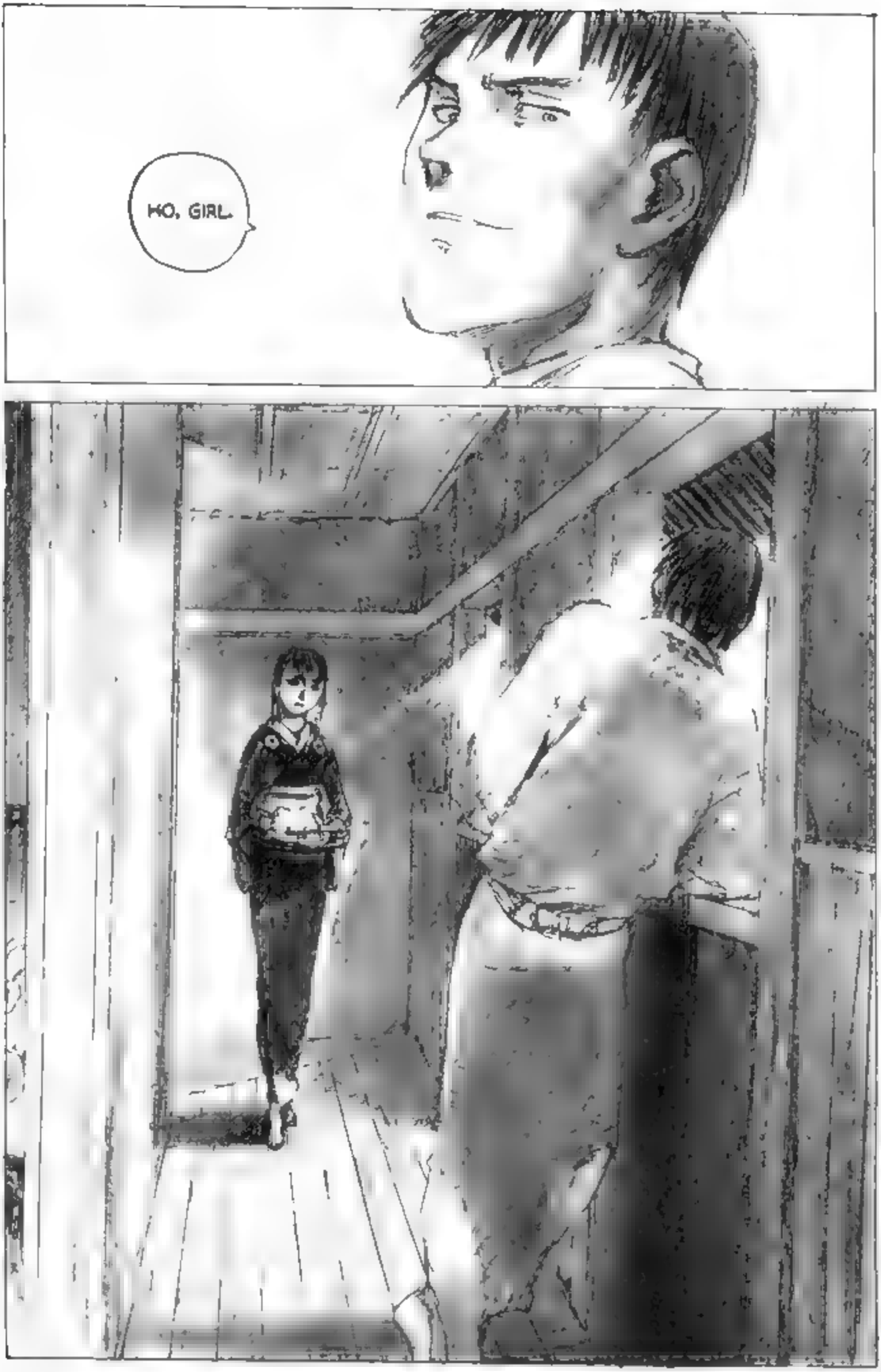
I TOLD YOU, GIRL--
--DON'T UNDER-ESTIMATE THEM.
BUT...
THOSE *BANSHI* SAMURAI... IT'S LIKE THEY HAVE A SIXTH SENSE, Y'KNOW?
AND IT'S SHARPER THAN YOU DREAM. THEY SEEM TO SEE RIGHT THROUGH SNEAKS AND TRICKSTERS.
MAYBE BECAUSE OF THAT, A LOT OF *SEKISHO* POSTS GO FROM FATHER TO SON.
AND WHILE THEY MAY SWITCH 'EM FROM *SEKISHO* TO *SEKISHO*, HARDLY NONE OF THEM EVER GET FIRED.
箱根驛
JUST SHOWS HOW MUCH THE *BAKUFU* TRUSTS THEM, RIGHT?
SOME CONNEC-TIONS, A COUPLE LITTLE BRIBES?
HAH!
THAT WOULDN'T HELP *NOTHIN'*.
YOU'D JUST BE STICKING YOUR HEAD RIGHT IN THE NOOSE.

KTAK
...WHAT ON EARTH IS ANOTSU THINK-ING...?
SHE'S RIGHT. BUT THEN...
TEA, TEA... HMM.
HUH? OH, SURE.
FORGOT TO BOIL SOME UP. CAN YOU COME GET IT LATER?
HERE.
GREAT... THANK YOU.

?
SO THAT TALK OF YOURS WAS JUST MAKE BELIEVE, HUH?
WELL, THEN... LEMME TELL YA SOME-THING.
TO BE HONEST, IT DEPENDS ON IF THE PARTY IN QUESTON'S GOT THE GUTS FOR IT.
BUT THERE *IS* A WAY, I FIGURE. JUST ONE.
A WAY *ANYONE* CAN GET THROUGH A *SEKISHO*.

HEART OF DARKNESS

Part 5


NO, GIRL.

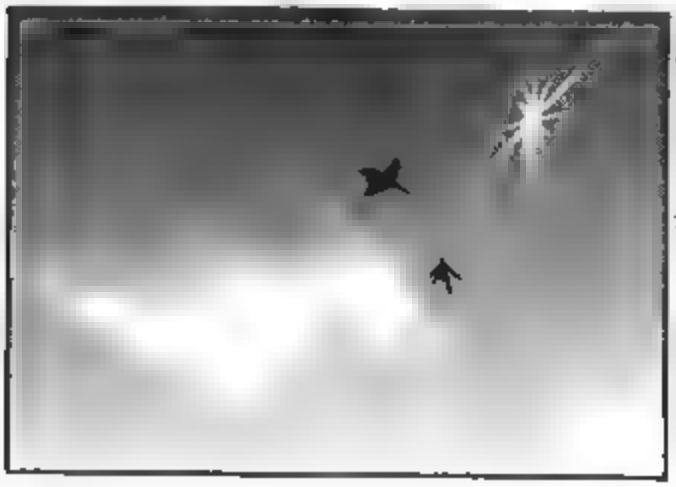
YOU WENT TO A LOT OF TROUBLE.
SHOULDA JUST HAD THE *MESHIMORI-ONNA* BRING IT UP.
I DIDN'T HAVE A CHOICE, DID I?
WE DON'T TAKE A STEP OUTSIDE, JUST STARE OUT THE WINDOW ALL DAY LONG.
WOULD YOU RATHER SHE CAME IN AND SAW US DOING THAT?
SHE'D CERTAINLY START WONDERING WHAT WE WERE UP TO.
WHAT'S THE DIF? NOW SHE'S CURIOUS ABOUT THE WEIRDOS WHO COME DOWN FOR THEIR FOOD.
....
WHERE'S MANJI?
OUT BUYING A WHORE.
HE'S IN THE CRAPPER.

ANYWAY, I DON'T WANT YOU WANDERING OFF TOO MUCH.
YOUR JOB IS WATCHING FOR ANOTSU. REMEMBER?
OH... RIGHT.
YOU *HAVE* SEEN HIM BEFORE, RIGHT?
YES... BUT...
IF HE'S IN DRAG, THAT COULD MAKE IT KIND OF HARD.
DON'T YOU THINK?
GIMME A BREAK. SO HE'S IN DRAG! IT'S NOT LIKE HIS DICK FELL OFF.
HE CAN'T HIDE THE WAY HE WALKS, HIS BODY LANGUAGE, THAT KIND OF STUFF.
YOU REMEMBER ANY OF THAT?
WELL, *UM*... NO.

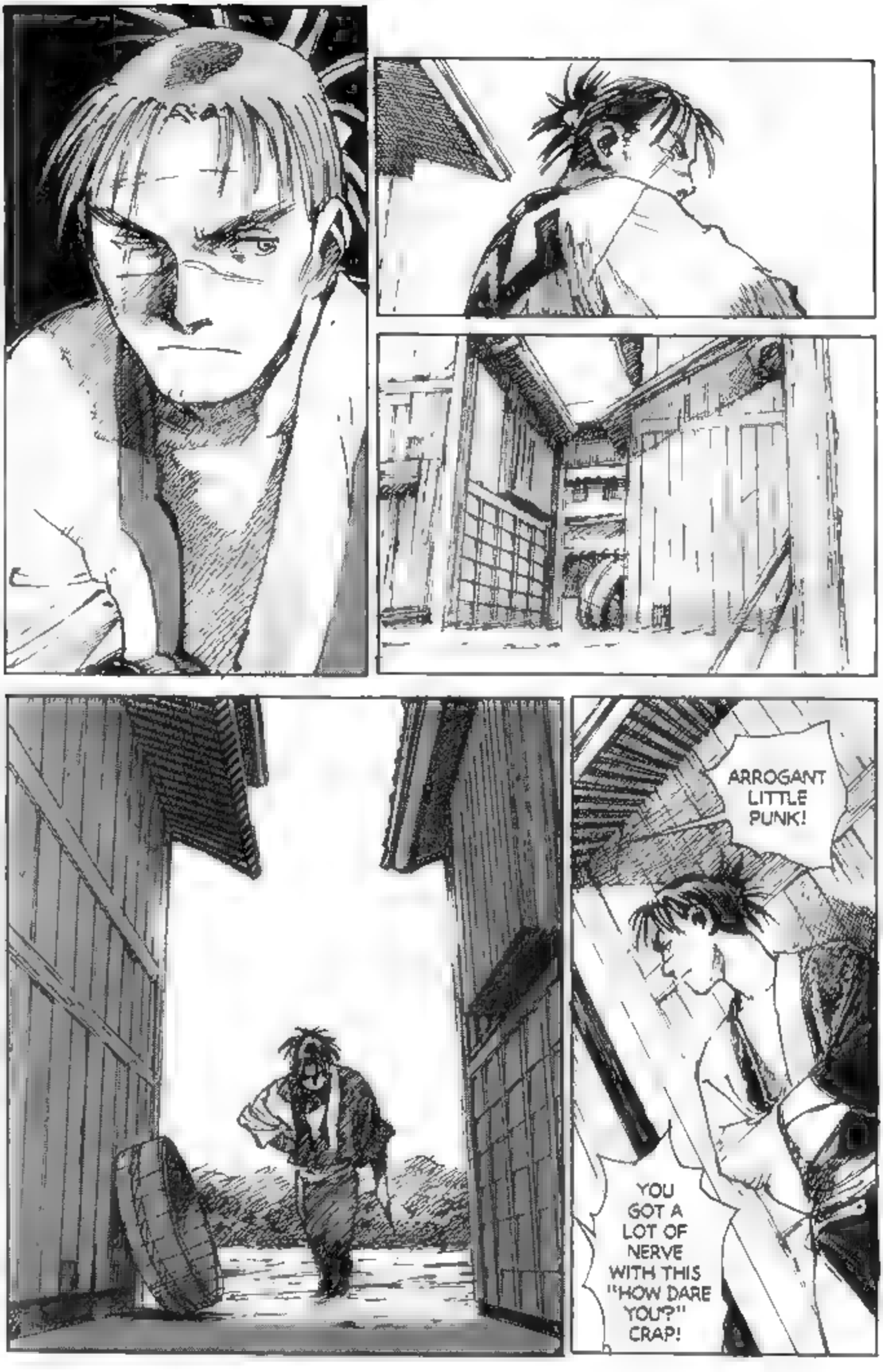
IF HE WAS DRESSED LIKE A WOMAN...
...HE COULD LOOK PRETTY ELEGANT.
BUT...
HUH?
...WOULDN'T HE BE ACTING EMBARRASSED? I MEAN, A MAN WHO HEADS A WHOLE SWORD SCHOOL, HIDING HIMSELF LIKE THAT...?
GUESS HE JUST DOESN'T WANT THE HASSLE...
...OF HAVING TO FIGHT A BUNCH OF YOUNG PUNKS OUT TO MAKE A NAME FOR THEMSELVES.
ANYWAY... EVER SINCE THE DAYS OF YAMATO-TAKERU...
...EVERY-BODY KNOWS ONLY HEROES AND PERVERTS ARE CRAZY ENOUGH TO DO DRAG.
AND IN THIS BASTARD'S CASE...
...I DECIDE WHICH ONE HE IS!

SO, SHIRA... I GUESS...
...YOU MUST BE PRETTY TOUGH, HUH?
YEAH. I AM.
SO WHAT'S YOUR POINT?
WELL... um... HA, HA!
Oh Yeah!
OH! THAT'S RIGHT!
I NEED TO PICK UP THE TEA!
WHAT? I TOLD YOU TO STAY PUT!
GET IT?
ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME? HEY!
USE YOUR DAMN HEAD!
I'LL JUST BE A SEC, HONEST!

I NEEDED THAT
WHEWW... THAT WAS SOME SERIOUS LOAD.



DAMN... I'M STARVING.


ARROGANT LITTLE PUNK!
YOU GOT A LOT OF NERVE WITH THIS "HOW DARE YOU?" CRAP!

YOU CUR! SAY IT AGAIN!
I DARE YOU TO SAY IT AGAIN!
HAH! I'LL SAY IT AS MUCH AS I WANT!

FACT IS, IT'S ALWAYS THE WORTHLESS PUNKS LIKE YOU...
...WHO START WHINING AND SNIVELLING IF YOUR SCABBARDS GET BUMPED A LITTLE IN THE STREET.

WHEN RŌNIN START WORRYING ABOUT APPEARANCES, THEY SURE TURN INTO ARROGANT LITTLE SHITS.
THAT WIMPY LOOKIN' SWORD OF YOURS-- WHAT'S THE STORY ON THAT?

"WIMPY LOOKING," YOU THINK?
HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO TEST IT?

WELL, DOG?!
AAH!
H-HE DREW!
SHEEE-IT.
A FIGHT, HUH? GIMME A BREAK.
OH-HOH, HE DRAWS HIS SWORD! NOW THERE'S A REAL PUNK FOR YOU.
I DON'T LIKE ALL THESE SPECTATORS. BUT SO BE IT.
YOU'LL HAVE ALL ETERNITY TO REFLECT ON YOUR OWN STUPIDITY.
THAT'S GONNA BE YOUR JOB, YOU MISERABLE CUR!
"WORDS CAN NEVER HURT YOU," THEY SAY.
BUT WHEN YOU MOCK MY SWORDSMANSHIP...

...YOU MOCK THE NAME OF ANOTSU KAGE-HISA!
LEADER OF THE ITTŌ-RYŪ!

KRASSH
SHIRA! WHA-?!
I- I'M SORRY!
IDIOT! I TOLD YOU!
HERE... TAKE A GOOD LOOK...

HUH?! THAT'S HIM? THE ANOTSU?!
HUH. HE DON'T LOOK SO TOUGH
WHAT'S HE DOING HERE?!
WHO? THE ITTŌ-RYŪ? IS THAT THE ONE...
.....
.....
YOU'RE ANOTSU KAGEHISA?!
FAMOUS LITTLE BUGGER, AIN'T HE?
SO HOW ABOUT THIS ALLEGED "ANOTSU" ...?
WELL, GUESS I GOTTA ASK.
THOUGHT SO.
HIM? NO WAY!!
DIDN'T MAKE SENSE TO ANNOUNCE HIS OWN NAME LIKE THAT.

IT'S PROBABLY ONE OF HIS BODYGUARDS. GOOD SHOW, THOUGH.
I WONDER IF THE *RŌNIN* IS A PLANT, TOO?
BUT... WHY DO IT?
HUH?! *WHY?!*
?

LOOK-- OVER THERE. SEE HER?
THAT WOMAN.
HUH?
THE ONE HOLDING THE HAT?
NO! BEHIND HER AND RIGHT!
OH! NOW I SEE HER!
SEE? SHE'S JUST WALKING AWAY, TOTALLY IGNORING THE UPROAR.
GOT SOME HEIGHT ON HER, TOO... FOR A BROAD.
Hmmm
YES. I DO SEEM TO REMEMBER HIM BEING AT LEAST THAT TALL, BUT...BUT...
...THOSE SURE AREN'T A GUY'S HIPS.
AND IF HER TITS AND ASS ARE ALL PADDING?
MMM... YEAH.
AAH! SHE'S GETTING AWAY!

!
WAIT! THAT *THING!*
THAT *AXE!*
SEE? ALL WRAPPED UP IN CLOTH!
ANOTSU HAD A WEAPON JUST LIKE IT!
IT WEIGHS A *TON*--
--THERE'S *NO WAY* A WOMAN COULD CARRY IT LIKE THAT.
BUT, IF THAT'S NOT A SHE...
HAH-- *GOTCHA!*

TOO BAD FOR THE GUYS TROLLING IN THE OTHER RIVER...
...BUT THE ONE WITH THE FISH WINS, BY GOD!

旅龍
THAT'S ANOTSU?
WHAT THE HELL KINDA 'DRAG' IS THAT?

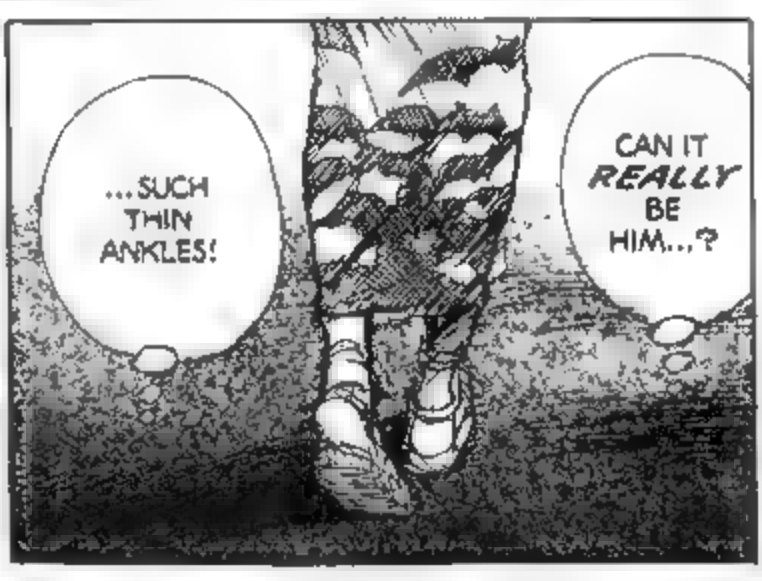
WHAT A MESS. THREE OF US HERE...
...AND ONLY ONE OF US KNOWS WHAT HE LOOKS LIKE. THIS SUCKS.
SHOULD I GO GET RIN? NAW... THERE'S NO GUARANTEE THEY'LL BE AT THIS LONG ENOUGH.

ANOTSU'S FACE.
I GOT A FEELING I HEARD SOMETHING ONCE, SOMEWHERE. WHERE THE HELL *WAS* THAT...?
HE... HE DIDN'T GIVE ME A NAME...
...BUT H-HE WAS A YOUNG SAMURAI, SIR!
W-WITH NARROW EYES AND LONG HAIR...

HEH...
.....
NOT MUCH HELP.
...CAN HE?
WELL, HE CAN'T BE STRONGER THAN *HER*...

.....
.....

UH-OH.
LOOK-ING FROM THIS CLOSE UP...

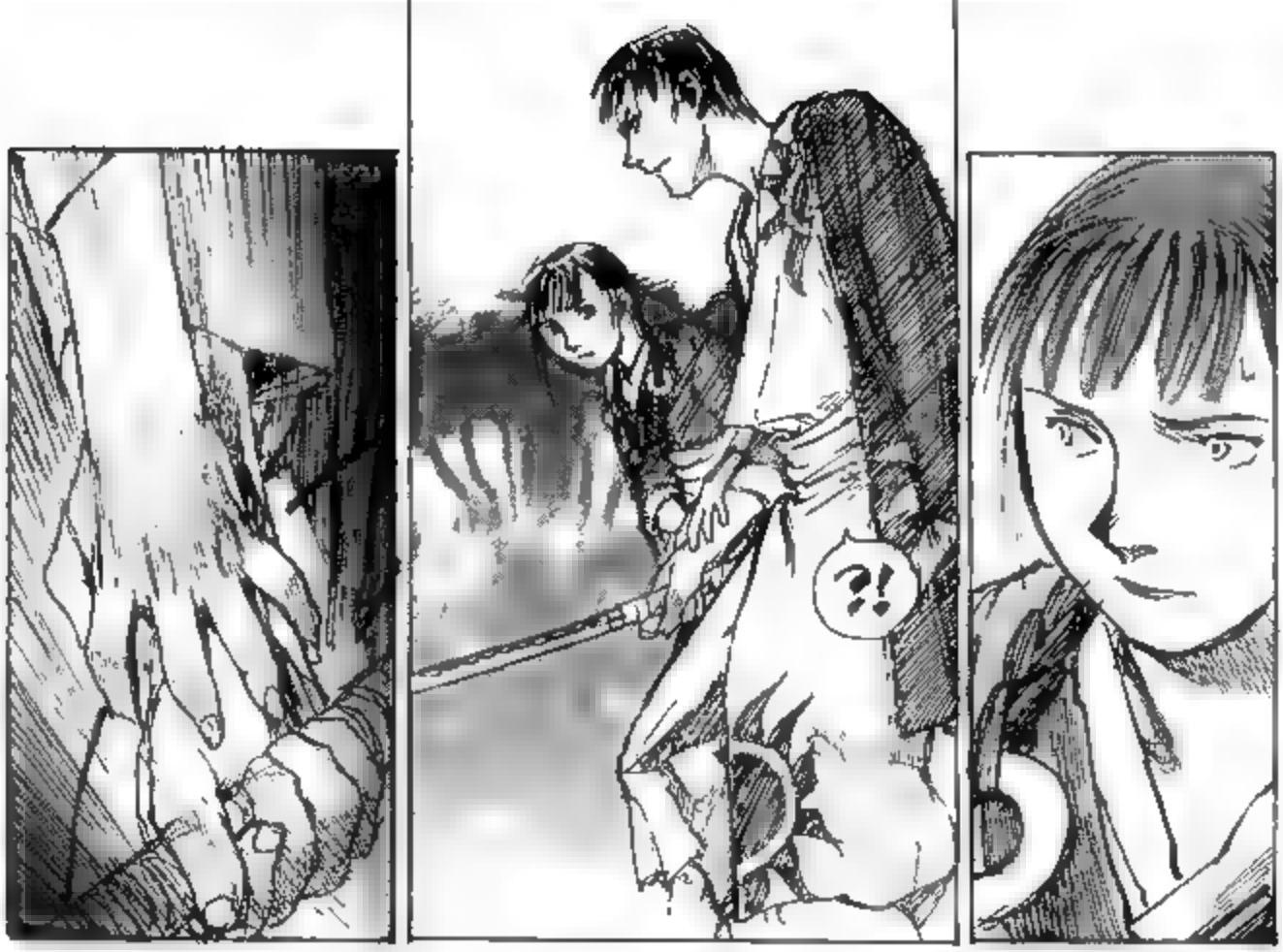

...SUCH THIN ANKLES!
CAN IT REALLY BE HIM...?

BUT THEN...
...TO CARRY THAT AXE...
WE'VE WALKED FOUR AND A HALF R/.
HUH?
SO, WHA--
OH?!
NO! W-WAIT A SEC!

?!
QUIET DOWN, KID!
LOOK, SHIRA.
WE CAN'T JUST... CUT HIM DOWN FROM BEHIND!
AT LEAST WAIT UNTIL I'VE SEEN HIS FACE!
YOU'RE HAVING SECOND THOUGHTS NOW?!
WHY?
WELL, UM... JUST LOOK.
NO BODY-GUARDS, NOTHING.
LET'S GET CLOSER AND TALK TO HIM.
AS SOON AS HE LOOKS BACK AT US, I'LL KNOW. AND THEN...
WELL, SHIT!
.....
.....
SO HOW'RE YA GONNA DO IT?
OH, uh... MAYBE...
SOMETHING LIKE-- "MA'AM, YOU DROPPED SOME-THING!"

kchirk

THANK YOU KINDLY, YA BASTARD!
SO YOU WANT TO DO IT *HERE*, HUH?


?!

Uh... EXCUSE ME, MA'AM?! YOU DROPPED SOME-THING!
I THINK IT'S YOUR MONEY POUCH!

.....
...?

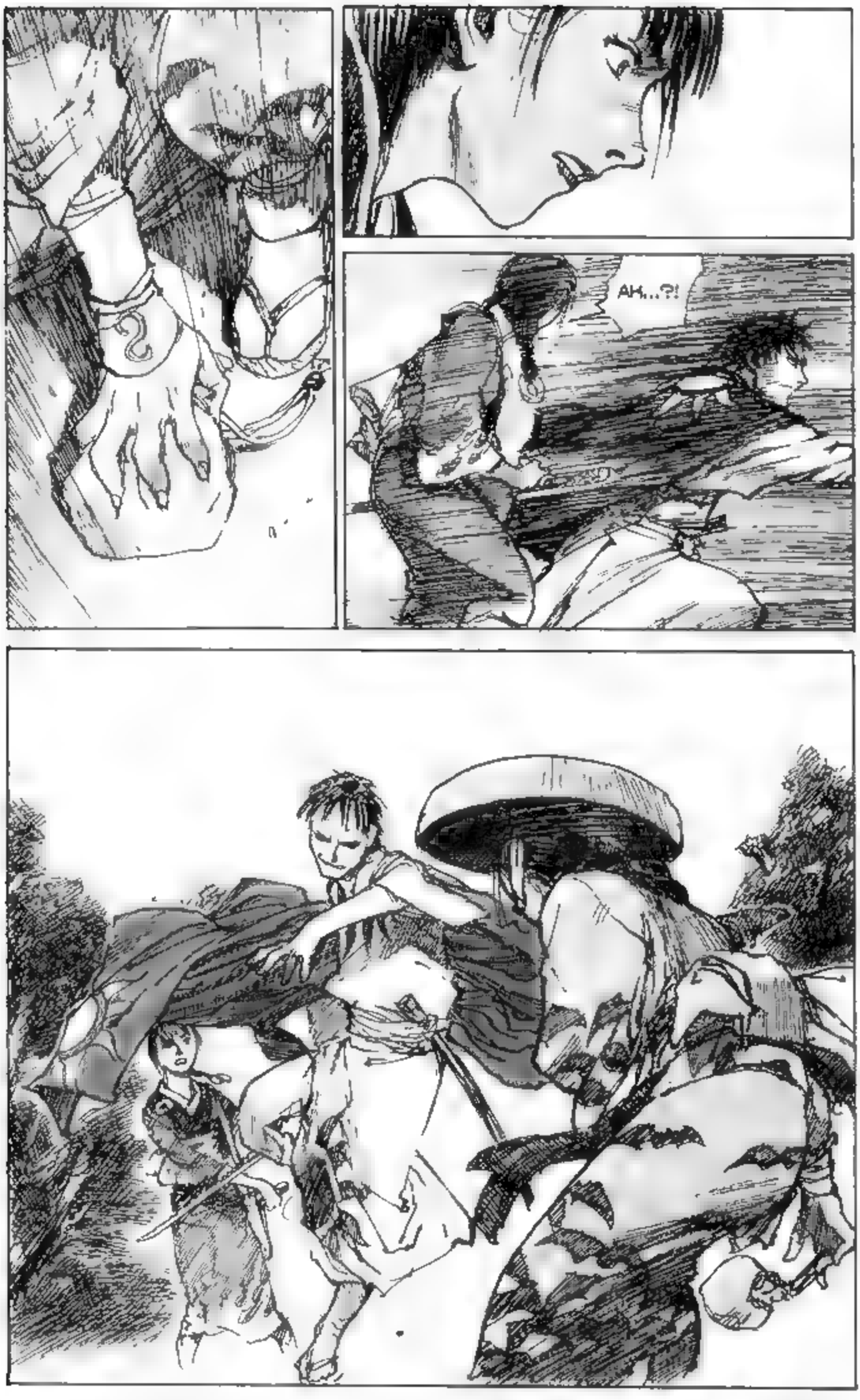
TH-THEY STOPPED!
NOW ?

WE SAID YA DROPPED SOME-THING!
YOU WANT ME TO TEACH YOU SOME MANNERS WITH THE EDGE OF MY SWORD?!

HEY.

BEFORE YOU PICK IT UP...
...HOW ABOUT A PROPER "THANK YOU"...?!

TAKE OFF YOUR HAT AND SHOW SOME RESPECT!


AH...?!

DON'T YOU GOT ANY EARS, YOU FRIGGIN' BITCH?!

KTONK

"KTONK"?!

.....
.....
HEY!
YOU AIN'T NO DUDE!
!
WHAT AN AWFUL THING TO DO!
MY FACE IS MY LIVELI-HOOD, SIR!

AND I MUST CONFESS TO BEING SOMEWHAT CURIOUS ABOUT YOUR COMMENT.
WHATEVER MADE YOU THINK THAT I WAS A MAN?

...?!
WOOD ?

WELL, SHIT.
SHIT!
WHAT A FRIGGIN' JOKE!
BUT I AIN'T LAUGHIN'.
WHAT KIND OF WHINY LITTLE SNOT YOU GOT FOR A BOSS?
HE REALLY THAT SCARED OF US OTHER KENSHI?
WETTING HIS PANTS, IS HE? HUH?!

KTONK
IS HE?!
SO IT IS YOU, IS IT?
THE FRIENDS OF THE SPY?
!
THANK YOU. THAT'S ALL I NEEDED TO SEE, TO KNOW I'M RIGHT.
YOUR AVERAGE KENSHI WOULD HAVE BEEN THROWN OFF BY THAT DISTURBANCE BACK IN TOWN.

ONLY A HANDFUL OF PEOPLE BESIDE OUR LEADER KNOW ABOUT THIS SCHEME.
YET APPARENTLY IT NEVER OCCURRED TO YOU TO QUESTION YOUR AGENT'S INFORMATION.
THE GARMENTS I CHANGED OUT OF AT THE DŌJŌ RESIDENCE WILL STILL SMELL OF A WOMAN, AFTER ALL.
OF COURSE, BY NOW YOUR SPY MAY HAVE CAUGHT ON.
HUH.
TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE!
SO THAT WAS IT-- THEY WERE TRYING TO SMOKE OUT THE MOLE AS WELL.

WELL, I'LL BE DIPPED IN DOGSHIT. HE REALLY THOUGHT THIS ONE THROUGH, DIDN'T HE?
AIN'T HE A CLEVER L'IL DICKENS!
HE FIGURED WE'D BE LAYING FOR HIM AT THE SHI-SHUKU...
...AND PLANNED TO DO US IN, WITH YOU AS THE LURE. RIGHT?
NOT QUITE. FIRST...
...IF IT TURNED OUT THERE REALLY WAS A SPY...
...WE WERE TOLD TO DO EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO GET HIS NAME OUT OF YOU.
OH, YEAH? WHO'S GONNA GET IT OUT OF US, AND HOW?!
YOU SURE AS HELL AIN'T! I MEAN, GIVME A BREAK!
ME? HA HA! GOOD SIR, I'M JUST AN ORDINARY GEISHA...
...HIRED AS BAIT, NOTHING MORE.

MY ROLE IN THIS WAS TO KEEP YOU OCCUPIED...
...UNTIL THE BOYS FROM ITTŌ-RYŪ ARRIVED.
SEE...?
I MUST SAY I'M QUITE RELIEVED THEY'RE FINALLY HERE...

HEART OF DARKNESS

Part 6

?!
IS THAT YOU, SAIKAYA? IT'S BEEN A WHILE!
HA HA... SO IT HAS! FANCY MEETING YOU HERE, O-SEI!
HAVEN'T SEEN YOU SINCE YOU WERE WORKING AT THAT HIKOJU PLACE. HOW'S IT GOING?

QUITE WELL, THANK YOU.
AND YOU...? HOW'S BUSINESS?

OH, SO-SO.
BUT YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAY--WHEN THE DOCTOR AND THE DRUGGIST MAKE MONEY, THEY'RE THE ONLY HAPPY ONES.

SO I COULD BE HAPPIER, IF YOU CATCH MY DRIFT ...EH?

ENDS UP I SPEND MOST OF MY TIME HAVING *THIS* SORT OF FUN INSTEAD...
...IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.
WHOO
OOMPH!
DO YOU HAVE ANYTHING TO STOP BLEED-ING?
YOU BET. AND SO... WHAT SHALL WE DO ABOUT THESE FOLKS ANNOYING YOU?
HERE YOU GO
THAT'S UP TO YOU.
I'VE DONE MY PART-- THE REST IS NONE OF MY BUSINESS.
FAIR ENOUGH, MY DEAR.

SO...
IWAMI GINZAN,
MY FRIEND.
HAVE YOU GOT
ANYTHING IN
YOUR BOX
FOR PEST
CONTROL?

WELL. SHIT.

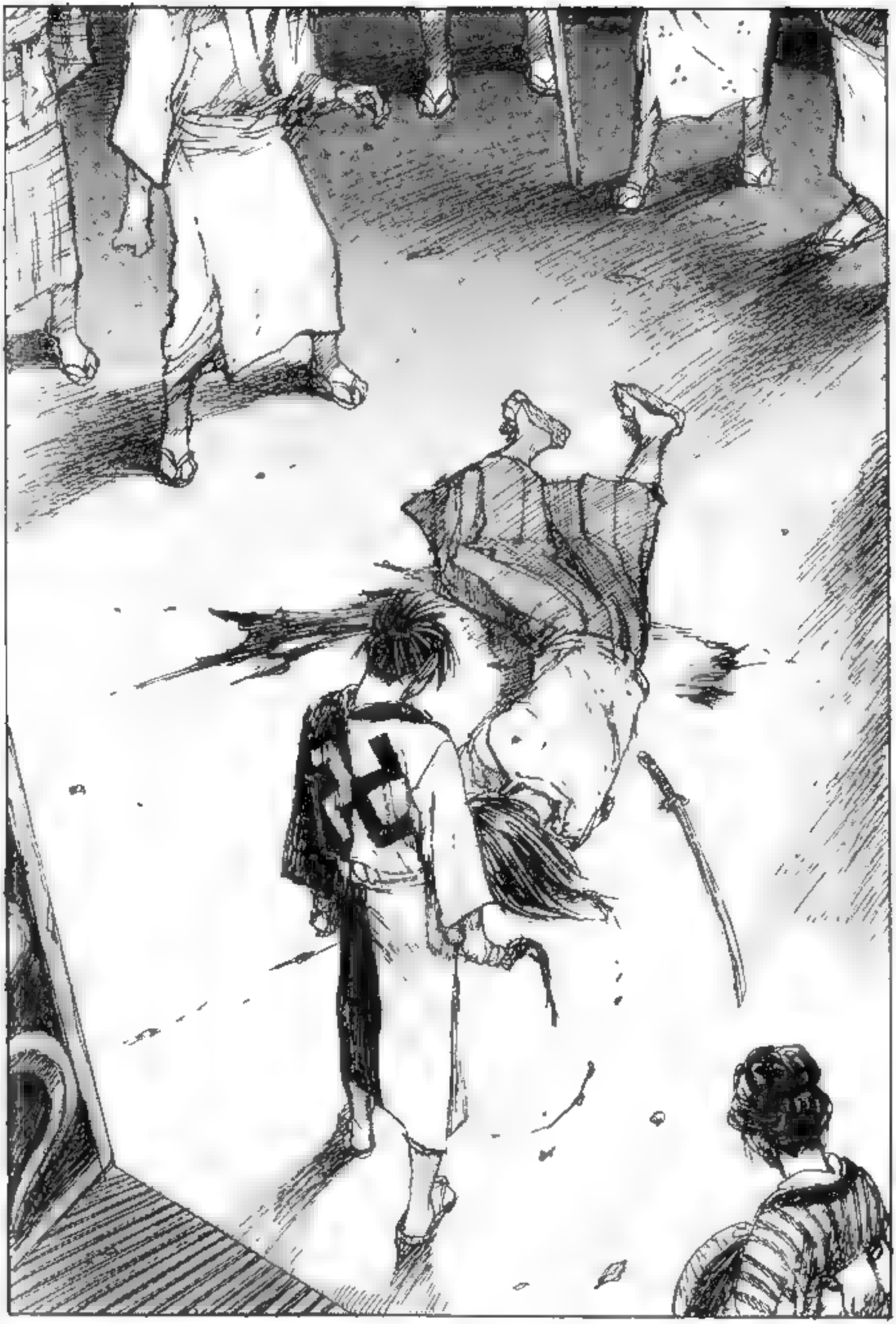
ONE AND A HALF RYÔ EACH..
.. SO TWO OF 'EM MAKES THREE RYÔ.

AND THE BITCH AIN'T WORTH SQUAT.

AND HERE I WAS EXPECTING A GOOD THIRTY RYŌ FOR ANOTSU.
HARDLY SEEMS FAIR, DO IT?
WELL, IF THAT'S THE WAY WE'RE GONNA PLAY IT, THEN LISTEN UP, RIN!
?
WHAT-EVER HAPPENS, DON'T DRAW YOUR SWORD!
EVERY ONE OF THESE GUYS...
...IS MY TOY TO PLAY WITH!

?!?
I DON'T UNDER-STAND. WH-
SHUDDUP!
ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW IS THAT IF YOU BUTT IN, I'LL KILL YOU, TOO.
HA HA... WHY, THANK YOU, SIR. TO BE SO GROSSLY UNDER-ESTIMATED...
...IS NOT MERELY IMPRESSIVE, BUT DOWNRIGHT ASTONISH-ING!
AND WHAT EXACTLY DO YOU PLAN TO DO WITH THAT... THING?
YOU'RE GOING TO DUEL ME WITH A SAW? WHAT ARE YOU-- A CARPENTER?! HA HA!

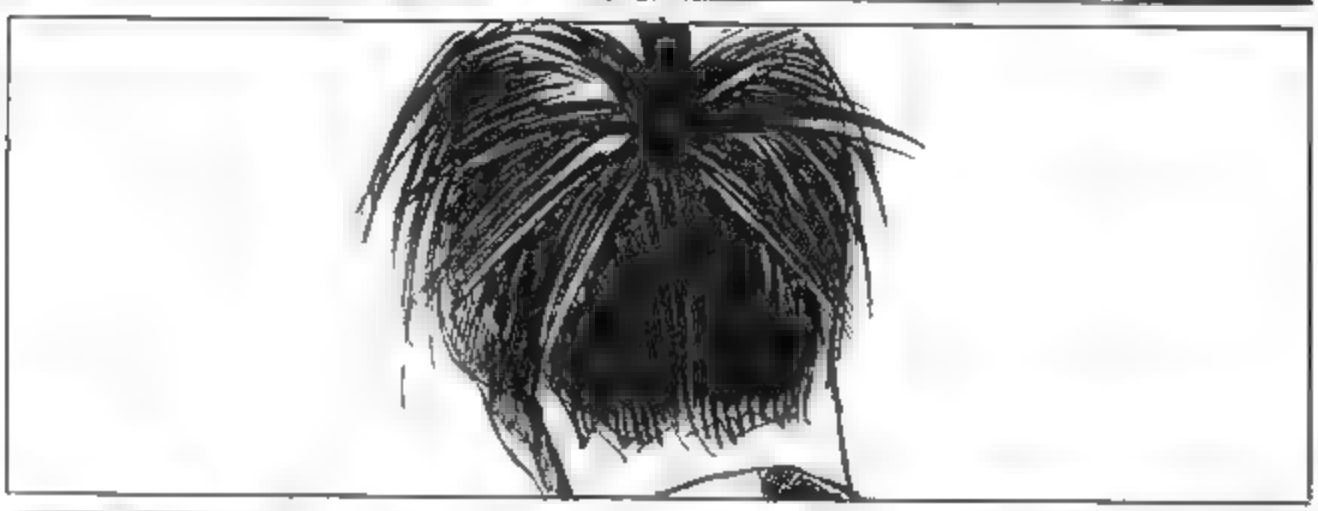
I SPEND ALL THIS TIME WAITING, AND THEN HAUL MY BUTT ALL THE WAY OUT HERE...
...AND ALL I FIND IS SOME WHORE-HOUSE SKANK?
IF I'D KNOWN *THAT*, I SURE AS HELL WOULDN'T BE WASTING MY TIME OUT HERE IN THE BUSH, GETTIN' MOSQUITO BITES ON MY ASS.
TO HELL WITH *THIS* SHIT! I'M GOING RIGHT BACK TO EDO TO FIND ME SOME *DECENT* BITCHES TO RAPE.
TOO BAD, THOUGH...
...I'D LOVE TO SLICE YOU OPEN AND PITCH YOUR STINKIN' GUTS INTO THE KANDAGAWA RIVER!
THEN I'D WATCH THE FISH FEED ON 'EM WHILE I KICKED BACK AND SIPPED A LITTLE BREW!



.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
ALL...
IS...
VANITY...
??
YO.
BUDDY.
GOT A
QUESTION
FOR YA.

TRUTH BE TOLD, I AIN'T NEVER SEEN ANOTSU BEFORE.
TODAY'S THE FIRST TIME. BUT LIKE... HOW SHOULD I PUT IT...?
I KNOW EVERY WAR STORY GETS BIGGER IN THE TELLING, BUT SHIT!
IF A WIMP LIKE THAT CAN DO IT, THEN MAN, WHAT A CUSHY GIG, EH? RUNNING YOUR OWN SWORD SCHOOL, I MEAN.
SO? WHAT DO YOU THINK, MISTER RŌNIN...?
I DUNNO...
NO REAL REASON TO DOUBT HIM, I GUESS.
MAYBE THE CREDIT BELONGS TO YOUR SWORD ARM.
OH YEAH...?!

MUCH OBLIGED FOR THE KIND WORDS, STRANGER!
IN THAT CASE... I'LL JUST LEAVE IT AT THAT.
SEE YA.
HANG IN THERE!
.....
.....



FORGIVE ME!

SLASH

SKSSH HH
OH, WELL.
WHERE'D THE *REAL* ONE GO, I WONDER?

GCHK
.....
.....
...?
AH...
AAGH!

GEH, HEH HEH...
HA HA HA!
FOO
.....
.....
I... I DON'T BELIEVE IT!

SHIRA PUSHED ME AND I WENT FLYING...
AND BY THE TIME I GOT UP AND TURNED AROUND...
...THAT GUY'S LEG W-WAS ALREADY IN THE AIR...!
HNNG... AAG...
SO... DO YOU WANNA KNOW?

I ASKED, "DO YOU WANNA KNOW"...?
I DIDN'T ASK IF YOU WANTED TO DIE, ASSHOLE.
DAMN YOU! IF YOU'RE GONNA KILL ME, THEN KILL ME!
K- KNOW W- WHAT...?
"WHAT," YOU SAY?!

LOOK OUT!!
SMD

HYAAH!
FWAP

CRACK
GAAH!
NOW IT'S ALL PLAY TIME!
AND NOBODY RUINS MY FUN!
HEH, HEH HEH.
SHIRA! ARE YOU--
I SAID BUTT OUT, GIRL!

HEART OF DARKNESS
Part 7

BWAHAW HAW HAW!

HEY!
WHAT'S WITH THE FACE, PAL?!

YOU GOT IT BACK-WARDS, YOU DUMB SHIT.
IT'S ME. I'M THE GUY THAT'S GOT A RIGHT TO BE ANGRY.
WHAT PISSES ME OFF MOST...
...IS THAT NOW HYAKURIN OR THAT ASSHOLE GIICHI ARE GONNA SNAG THE GRAND PRIZE.
THAT TOTALLY SUCKS.
I AM SERIOUSLY HACKED OFF! SO...NOW WHAT TO DO...?
.....?
NOW I GET IT!

EVEN IF THE KŌSHŪ BYWAY HERE WAS A BUST...
...ANOTSU MAY HAVE RUN INTO HYAKURIN AND THE OTHERS ON THE ROADS *THEY* WERE WATCHING.

IN WHICH CASE...

HO! READY FOR MORE, EH?
COOL.

COME AND GET IT!

HUAAA!

TAP
FUU

RAAA!
CHOK

AAGH...
....!
NNG...!
I...
I DON'T
BELIEVE
IT!

BEFORE, AND NOW THIS TIME, TOO...
HE'S AIMING FOR THEIR LEGS, RIGHT FROM THE VERY BEGINNING!
.....
.....!
STARTING FROM THAT POSITION...TO BE ABLE TO MOVE TO MAKE THAT SORT OF CUT... INCREDI-BLE!

BUT WHY? WHY GO TO THE TROUBLE...?
IT WOULD HAVE BEEN WAY EASIER TO GO FOR THE BODY...
.....
.....
LOOKIN' GOOD, PAL.

BOTH YOUR LEGS WHACKED OFF...
...AND YOU DON'T EVEN WHIMPER. YOU GOT SERIOUS BALLS.
GLOK
NNG
AAH!
AW, MAN... DON'T DISAPPOINT ME NOW!

WELL, WHATEVER.
EVERY-THING'S READY, ANYWAY.
I'D LOVE TO SPEND SOME QUALITY TIME WITH YOU GUYS.
BUT THIS HERE BEING A MAIN ROAD AND ALL, GUESS I'D BETTER GET DOWN TO BUSINESS.
IN WHICH CASE...
?!
...FOR YOU, THIS'LL HAVE TO DO!

AAH...!
NNN GHH!
HEH... I'VE BEEN WANTIN' TO DO THIS FROM THE SECOND I SAW YOU.
AAGH!
.....
...!
STINGS A BIT, EH?
OOPS.
HEH-HEH
AAGH!

AH. WELL. GUESS I'LL LET YOU OFF EASY.
BWA HAW HAW HAW!

SPSSH
SPLITT
!
HERE! CATCH!
CLIP IT ON YOUR EAR OR NOSE, WHAT-EVER.
HE SURE DON'T NEED IT NO MORE.

SH...
SHIT...!
WHO? *ME*? YOU MEAN *ME*?
AW, FORGET IT. NOW... WE WERE TALKING, WEREN'T WE? SO NOW I'LL TELL YOU...
...WHAT YOU WERE ASKING ABOUT BEFORE!

??
YOU SAID SOMETHING LIKE... "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU GONNA DO...
...WITH A SAW?"
GRK
WELL... FIRST, I'M GONNA DO THIS.

AAG! AAHG! AAHNG!
MAN, THE GUY SQUAWLS ABOUT EVERY LITTLE SCRATCH. AIN'T YOU SUPPOSED TO BE A DOCTOR OR A DRUGGIST OR SOMETHING? PUSSY!
HELL, IT SHOULDN'T EVEN HURT THAT MUCH YET.
WITH A NICE CLEAN WOUND WITH A SHARP SWORD...
...SHOULD TAKE A LITTLE WHILE BEFORE YOU EVEN FEEL IT.

SO BEFORE IT STARTS TO HURT I GUESS I'M SUPPOSED TO WHACK YOUR HEAD OFF, RIGHT?
SOME KINDA SAMURAI *BUSHIDŌ* "COMPASSION" THING OR SOME CRAP LIKE THAT, RIGHT?

WELL, SORRY, PAL. THAT SHIT DON'T CUT ANY ICE WITH ME.
BESIDES, I'M STILL PISSED AT YOU FOR WASTING MY GODDAMN TIME.

RIGHT, LITTLE LADY...?

YOU'RE ANGRY TOO... RIGHT?
Eh... AH... WELL...

AND SO-- *HMM...*

?!
RIGHT ABOUT HERE, EH?
HE WOULDN'T ...?
N-NO! WAIT! STOP!!
ONE, TWO...
GRGG
NNG...

AAAAAH!!

OH SHIT! IT HURTS! AAGHH!! YOU BASTARD!!
REALLY?! EXCELLENT! IN FACT, PERFECT!

GOOD LUCK FOR ME THAT I LEFT THE REAL SCREAMER FOR LAST!
BWA HAW HAW HAW HAW HAW!

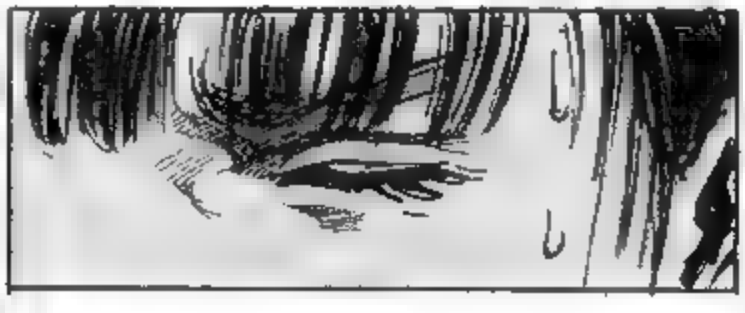
GUCH
GUCH

Oh... OH MY GOD. SHIRA... HE'S...

NNNG FWD
AAH!
FWIP
K-KILL ME!! PLEASE!! WHY D-DON'T YOU JUST KILL ME?!
HUH? C'MON, DON'T BE A QUITTER!
GRRGH
"NEVER SAY DIE," RIGHT? HEH, HEH!
I HAVEN'T POLISHED IT UP LATELY, SO IT DOESN'T CUT AS GOOD AS IT COULD, BUT HEY...
...IT'LL ALL BE OVER IN A MINUTE, ANYWAY.

.....
.....
...!

THIS... IS THIS ANY WAY TO KILL..,?



"I'M THE GUY THAT'S GOT A RIGHT TO BE ANGRY."
THAT'S WHAT SHIRA SAID.
WE SPENT TWO DAYS WAITING. ALL THREE OF US, AND ANOTSU TOOK ANOTHER ROUTE.
OKAY.
I KNEW IT MIGHT HAPPEN THAT WAY. SO SURE, I WAS STILL A LITTLE ANGRY. BUT...
IS THIS WHY I'M SO WEAK? BECAUSE I DON'T FEEL THE WAY HE DOES?
NO. WHAT-EVER IT IS THAT MAKES SHIRA STRONG...
...IT'S TOTALLY DIFFERENT FROM THE SORT OF STRENGTH MANJI HAS.

THD
NNG... AHH..
NNK
Y-YOU ROTTEN B... BASTARD...
CUFF
CHOK

HUHN.
DIDN'T BEG FOR HIS LIFE.
WELL, HELL. THAT'S PRETTY GOOD.

SHIRA...
BUTT OUT.
EH? BUT...
JUST KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!
THERE'S STILL ONE LEFT. THE WORST ONE OF ALL.
"ONE LEFT"...?

.....
...!

OH, NO... YOU WOULDN'T...

SKSSH
SHIRA?!
NO!
WAI--
OH...?!
OH, NO...
NO!

NHSSH

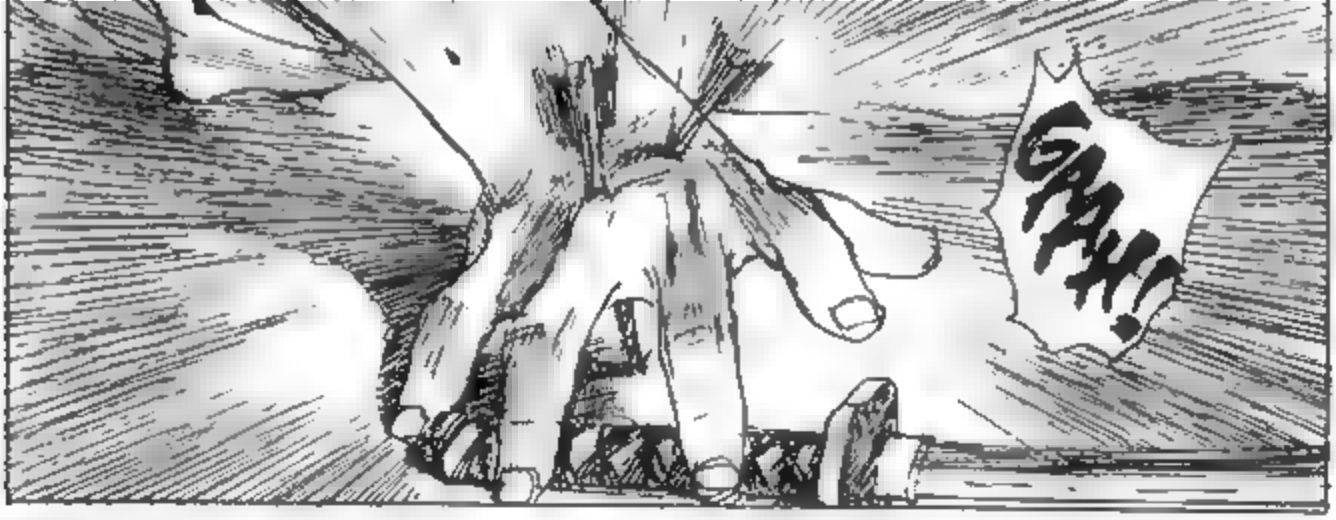
HEART OF DARKNESS

Part 8

.....
.....
WHOA... BUMMER. BIG TIME.
MAJOR, MAJOR DRAG!

?
EEK!
EEK!
EEEK!
WELL, THEY'RE REAL.
Hmph.
SO... TELL ME, SHINRIJI DEAR.
IF YOU DON'T MIND.
WHEN A TOUGH GUY WHO RUNS A KICK-ASS SWORD SCHOOL DECIDES TO QUEER OUT AND PLAY DRAG QUEEN, YOU FIGURE IT'S ONLY NATURAL HE'D GO ALL THE WAY AND GROW HIMSELF A SET OF BOOBS, TOO, HUH?!
WELL, UM, I... I GUESS SO...? MAYBE HE'D... I MEAN, THEY SAID... er... PRETTY AMAZING, HUH?!
??
WHOOK

YOU USELESS LITTLE JERK!
JESUS CHRIST
CAN'T I EVEN TRUST YOU TO GIVE ME DECENT INFORMATION?!
IT'S NOT MY FAULT! I SWEAR!! OUR CONTACT SAID "DRESSED AS A WOMAN FOR SURE"...!
HUH?! YOU STILL MAKING EXCUSES...?
TAK TAK
NO NO... IT IS ABSOLUTELY MY FAULT IN EVERY WAY
AND YOU.
WE HEARD THE ITTŌ-RYŪ DOESN'T HAVE ANY FEMALE STAFF.
I... I'M A SHINZŌ*, MA'AM.
WITH THE P-PLEASURE HOUSE ITTŌ-RYŪ LIKES TO USE...
* A YOUNG PROSTITUTE
HUH? A BROTHEL ?!
YES, MA'AM... IT'S CALLED YUKI-MACHI.
WE LOAN OUR SPARE ROOMS TO THE KENSHI THEY CALL IN FROM OUT OF TOWN.
THEY GET ROOM AND BOARD, AND IN EXCHANGE...
...IF WE NEED A BOUNCER OR SOMETHING, THEY TAKE CARE OF IT.

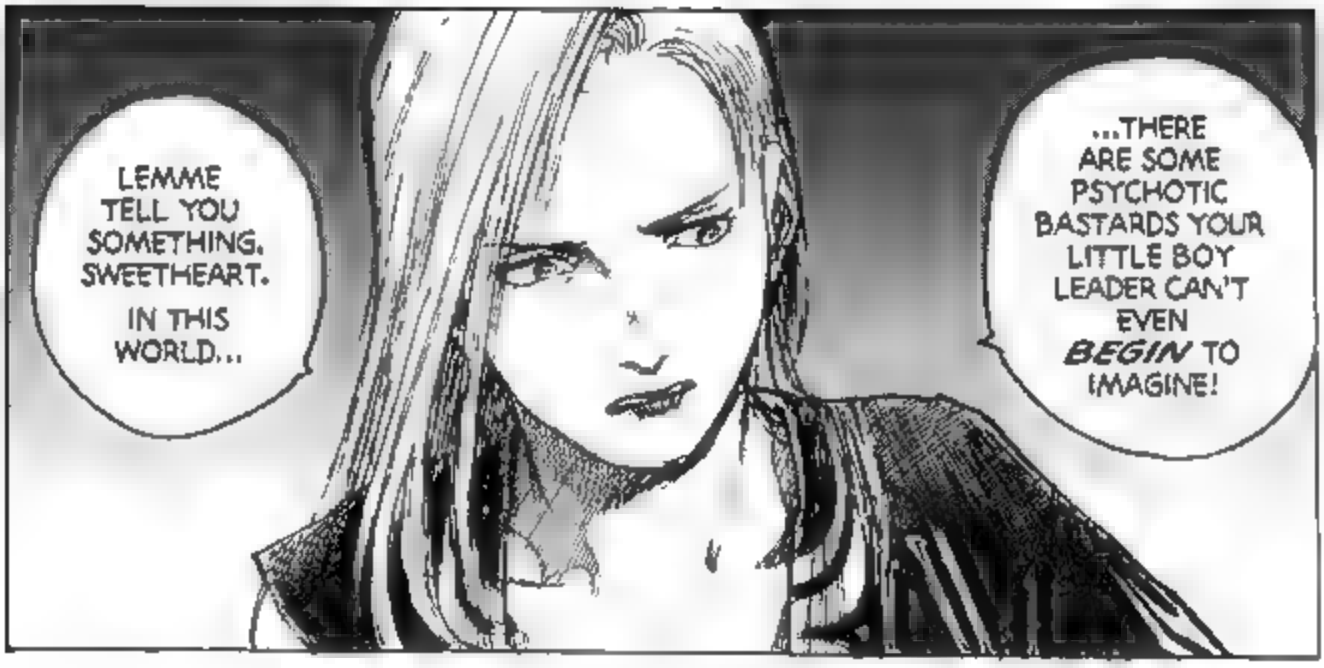

GAAH!

AHH!
UGH!

HE'D SEND SOME POOR YOUNG HOOKER INTO A MESS LIKE THIS... DAMN!
ANOTSU KAGEHISA, YOU'RE REALLY STARTING TO PISS ME OFF!

B-BUT... THEY TOLD US... IF TH-THINGS WENT WRONG, JUST TELL YOU WHATEVER WE KNEW.

AND IF WE DID THAT...
...YOU WOULDN'T KILL SOMEONE WHO WASN'T A KENSHI...
WHAT?!
WHAT KIND OF IDIOT WOULD COUNT ON HIS ENEMY HAVING A CONSCIENCE?!


LEMME TELL YOU SOMETHING, SWEETHEART.
IN THIS WORLD...
...THERE ARE SOME PSYCHOTIC BASTARDS YOUR LITTLE BOY LEADER CAN'T EVEN *BEGIN* TO IMAGINE!

AAAA!
AAAUG!
AAHH!
GUD
N-
NO. .
PLEASE...
FORGIVE
ME...
I...
AAH!
NO
WAY.

thok
AH!
NYEH, HEH, HEH...
NO, SHIRA!
STOP!

WHAT THE...? YOU AGAIN...?
LOOK, SHIRA-- YOU MUST BE SATISFIED NOW, RIGHT?! LET'S JUST GO! OKAY...?
SO WE FAILED-- IT WAS JUST BAD LUCK. IT WASN'T OUR FAULT!
WE'LL WAIT AND TRY AGAIN... RIGHT?!
I MEAN... WHY DO YOU HAVE TO KILL THIS WOMAN?
SHE'S ONLY HERE BECAUSE ANOTSU HIRED HER, THAT'S ALL. YOU DON'T...
RIGHT...?

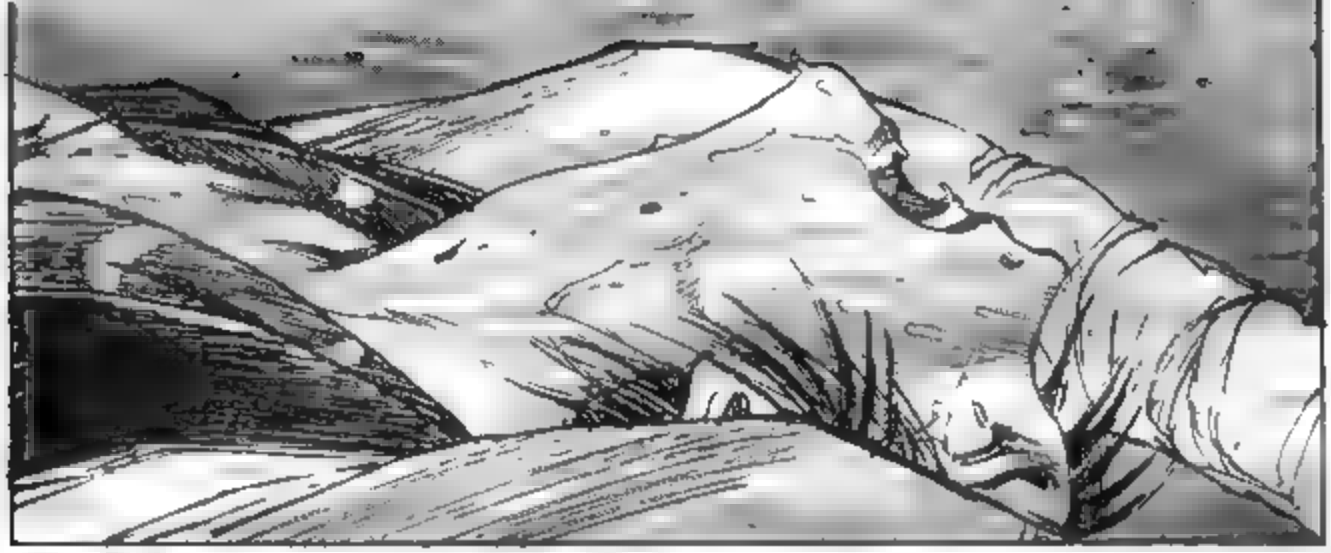
KRAK
FUCK THAT SHIT!
THAT'S TWICE I'VE TOLD YOU.
NOW KEEP YOUR GOD DAMN MOUTH SHUT!
ONE THING YOU BETTER KNOW ABOUT ME.
THERE'S NOTHING... NOTHING I HATE MORE THAN LECTURES FROM SOME DAMN BRAT!

.....
.....
.....!
HEH, HEH, HEH...
BRINGS BACK MEMORIES, LOOKIN' AT THIS SCENE.
BEEN HERE BEFORE... YEAH, WHEN I WAS TRACKING SOME DAMN ITTŌ-RYŪ KID... HE HAD THIS WHORE... SHEEE-IT.
LIKE HE WAS IN LOVE WITH HER.
HEH...I LAID HER OUT JUST LIKE THIS. SLICED HER A BIT. TRIED TO GET HER TO SQUEAL.
BUT SHE KEPT IT ZIPPED, THE BITCH. SO IN THE END, I JUST OFFED HER.

I'M NOT A TOTAL MONSTER, HEY? THOUGH WHEN I DID HER, IT KINDA OCCURRED TO ME, YOU KNOW?
"SHIRA, MY MAN-- YOU'RE ONE CRUEL-ASS DUDE! BWA HAW HAW!" OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT
BUT TODAY... TODAY I DON'T FEEL NOTHIN'. SO, YOU WANT TO HATE SOMEONE, SLUT...
...HATE YOUR FRIGGIN' BOSS!
GUESS HE DIDN'T THINK ABOUT WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN TO YOU, HEY?
HEY...?
GUSH
FAH!
WHOA! STINGS A BIT, EH? SORRY 'BOUT THAT. BWA HAW HAW!

LET'S SEE WHAT YOU GOT.
!!
N- NO... D- DON'T!
C'MON--YOU'RE A WHORE, RIGHT?! DON'T YA KNOW "THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT"...?
EH?
AAH!

P-
PLEASE...
NO...
PLEASE
DON'T...
OH,
GOD...
AA...!
AAH!
HF
.....?!
OH, NO...
NO!
PLEASE!
ANYTHING
BUT
THAT!
NO!!
PLEASE
FORGIVE ME!
I'M
BEGGING
YOU!
Nooo!
SLICK

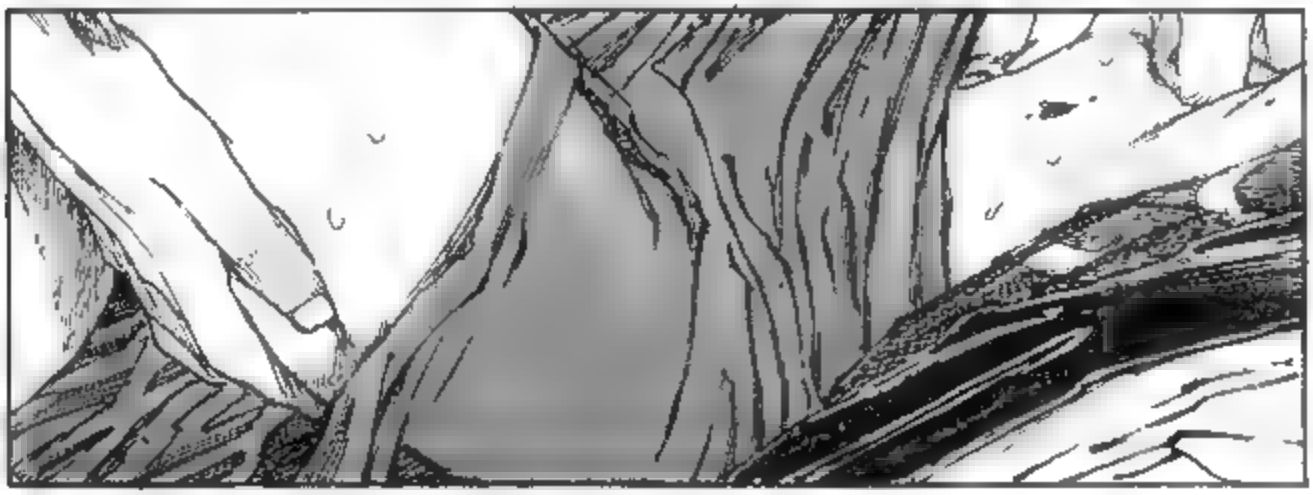


NNNN
AAAG!!!

NYA HAHA!
PERFECT! YOU GOT IT!
WHEN A WOMAN'S WRITHING IN PAIN, HER STOMACH JERKING LIKE THAT...

...IT'S EXQUI-SITE!!
LIKE WATCHING A SNAKE DIE...

GUUK
AH! AH! AAAGH!!
NGN? HEY.
HEY, QUIT SQUIRMIN' AROUND SO MUCH, HUH?
IT'D BE A BITCH IF YOU BLED TO DEATH BEFORE I COULD DO YA!
I'D HATE IT IF YOU GOT ALL THE PAIN AND NO PLEASURE.
I'LL MAKE YOU FEEL *REAL* GOOD, BABE... I *WILL*.



N-
NO.
NO.

YOU KNOW... FROM THE DAY I MET YOU...
...SHIRA...
I'VE FOLLOWED WHAT YOU DO WITH THESE EYES... WATCHED EVERYTHING.
STUDIED WHAT IT IS THAT YOU HAVE... AND MANJI DOESN'T.
I CAN'T FIND THE WORDS. BUT...
WHEN YOU FED ME THE DOG I'D BEFRIENDED... AND WHEN I WATCHED HOW YOU FOUGHT JUST NOW...
I FELT LIKE THROWING UP. BUT... BUT SOME-HOW...
...I FELT LIKE YOU WERE TEACHING ME SOMETHING I LACKED, TOO.

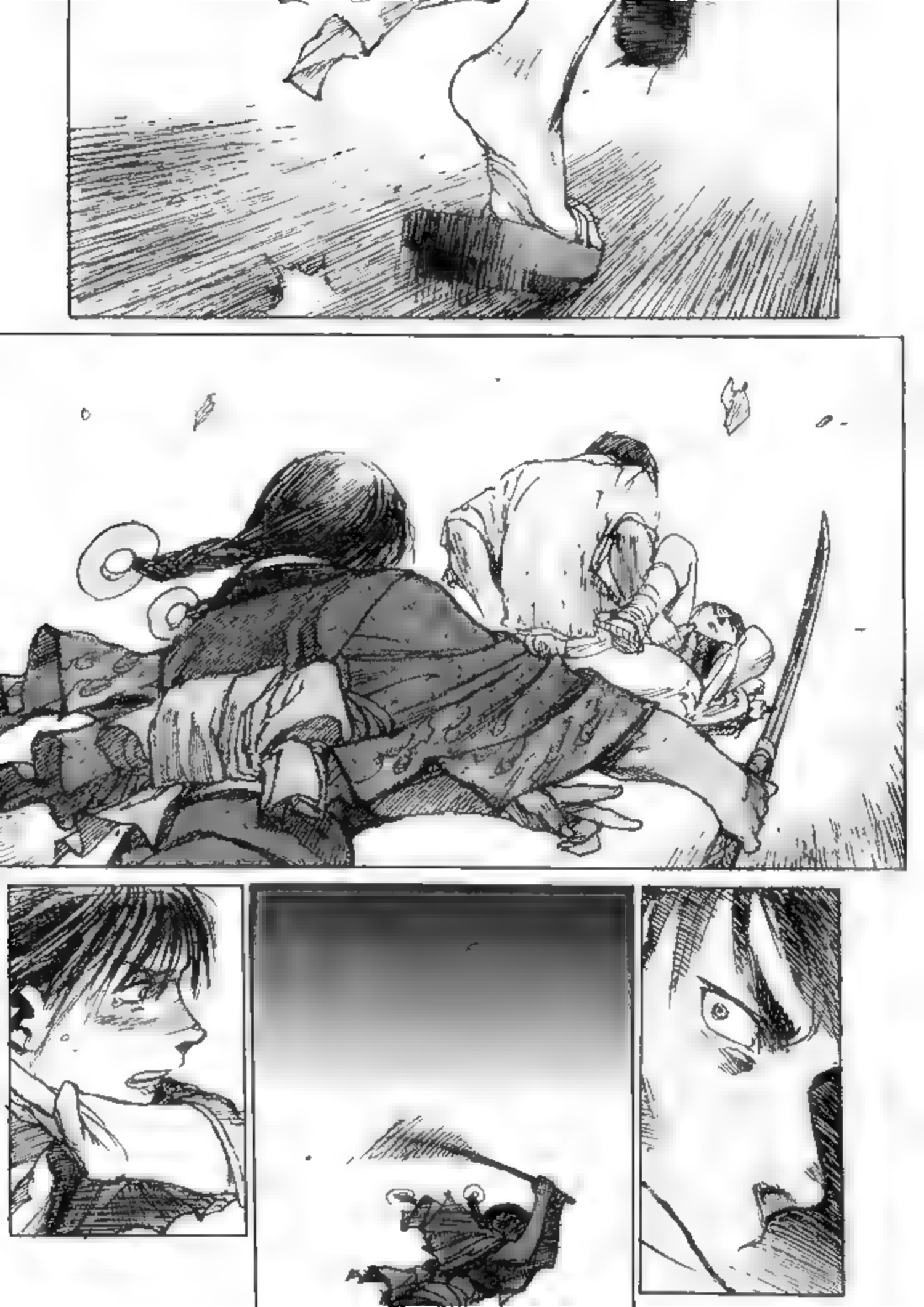
BUT NOW, SEEING THIS... AT LAST I KNOW.
I WAS WRONG. COM-PLETELY WRONG!
I...
I'VE BEEN TRYING HARD. TRYING TO THINK OF YOU, SHIRA...
...AS MY COMRADE-IN-ARMS.
BUT THE TRUTH IS...
I DESPISE PEOPLE LIKE YOU!!
STRIPPING AND TORTURING AN UNARMED WOMAN! HAH! YOU ENJOY THAT?!
YOU'RE JUST THE SAME!
THE SAME AS THE ITTŌ-RYŪ BASTARDS I HATE!!

.....
.....
YOU ALL DONE NOW?

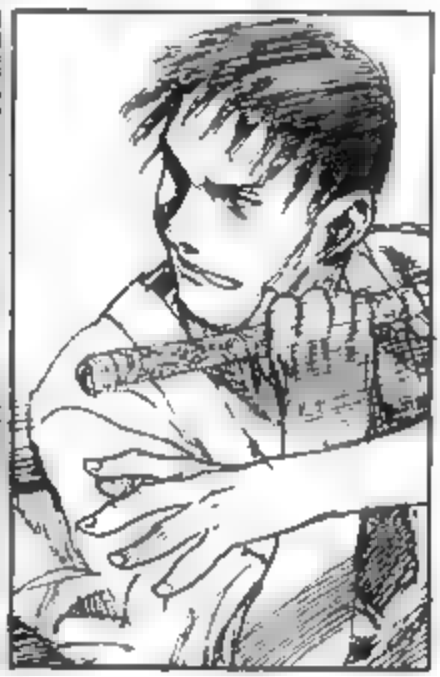
THEN *SHUDDUP* AND *SIDDOWN.*

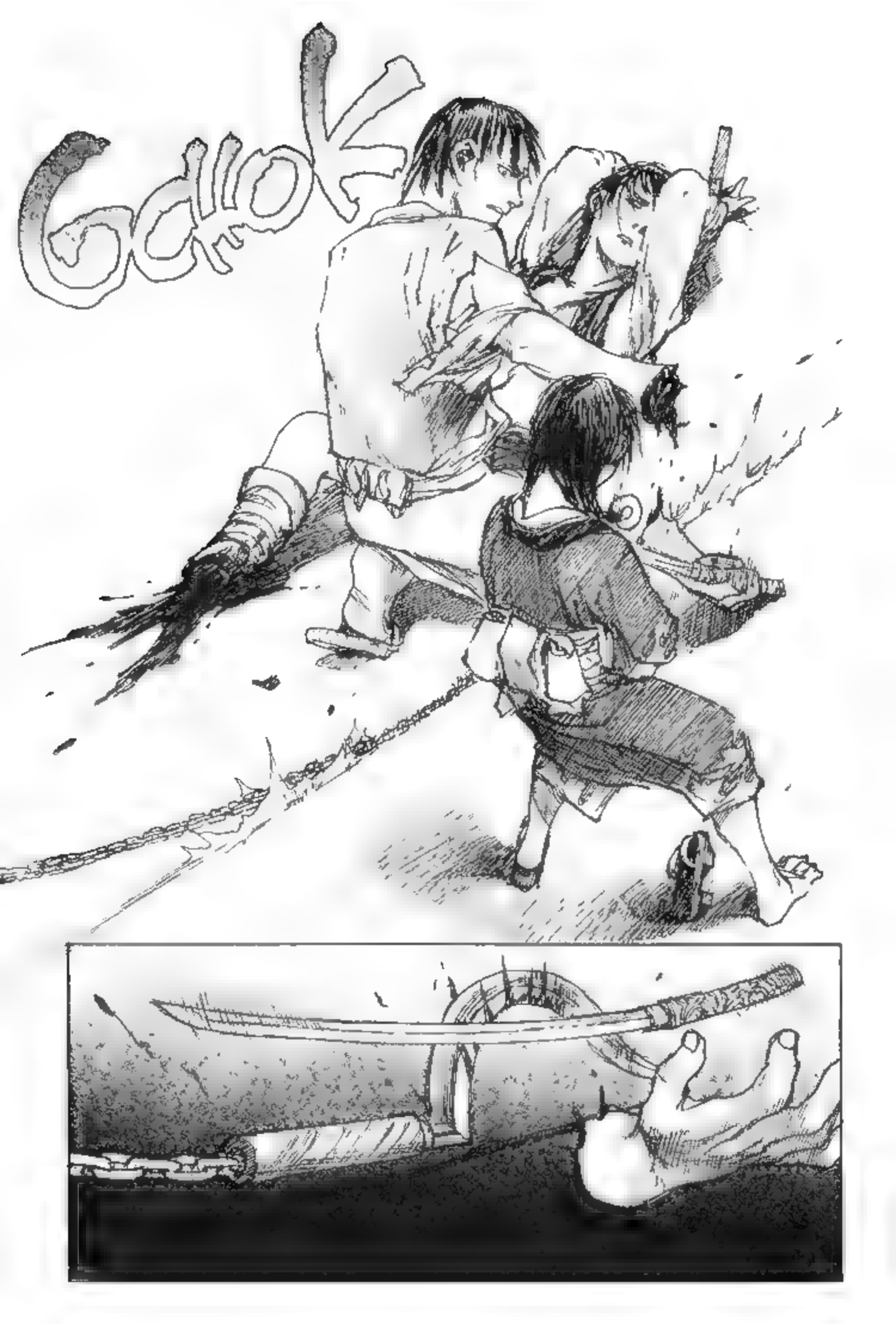
HOW CAN I HAVE ANY FUN WITH YOU WHINING AND SNIVEL-ING AROUND BEHIND ME?

OKAY... OKAY.
THAT'S *IT.*



hunf!

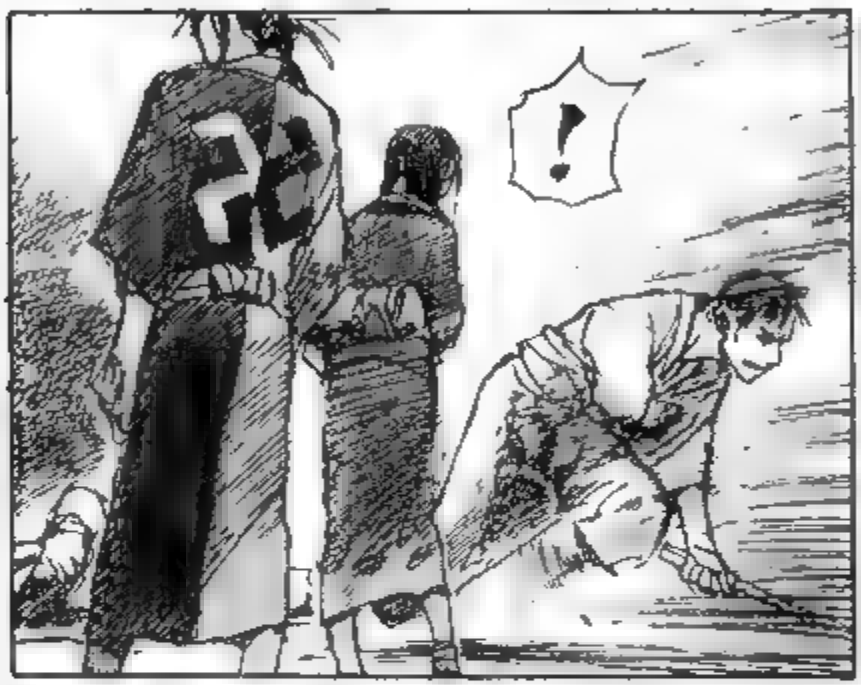



Gallok

WHA...
WHAT THE FUCK?!
H-HOLY SHIT!
WHOOPS! NICKED YA, DID I? SORRY 'BOUT THAT.
CAN YOU FORGIVE ME, OL' BUDDY?

MANJI...
?!
WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?
WHERE'S ANOTSU?
JESUS. SHIRA... WHAT IS THIS SHIT?
STRIPPING SOME POOR WOMAN...?
.....
.....!

MY... MY HAND...!
MY HAND... IT... IT'S...
NNG!
.....
.....
MUH...
GRAAHJJJ!!
TH-THERE!
M-MAYBE NOW YOU'LL--
UKYAAA!
GOOD GOD!
M-M-MURDER-ERS!!
EEEEK!


!

:haahh:
:hiff:
:huhh:

HUH?
HEY! WAIT A SEC!!
IF THAT CRAZY BASTARD GETS AWAY...
...ANYONE WHO SEES THIS'LL THINK I DID IT!
OKAY, RIN-- WE'RE OUTTA HERE.
HUH...? BUT... WAIT ..

GHRIIK
DO... DO YOU THINK SHE'LL MAKE IT?
HANDS OF FATE, RIN.

DAMN... WE CAN'T USE THE ROAD NOW.
NO CHOICE. IT'S THE FOREST. AWAY FROM SHIRA.
..... RIGHT.
DAMN IT. DAMN IT ALL....

.....
.....
IBANE SHINAN-JO... DŌJŌ OF THE SHINGYŌTŌ-RYŪ SCHOOL.
CORRECT...?
YES, SIR.

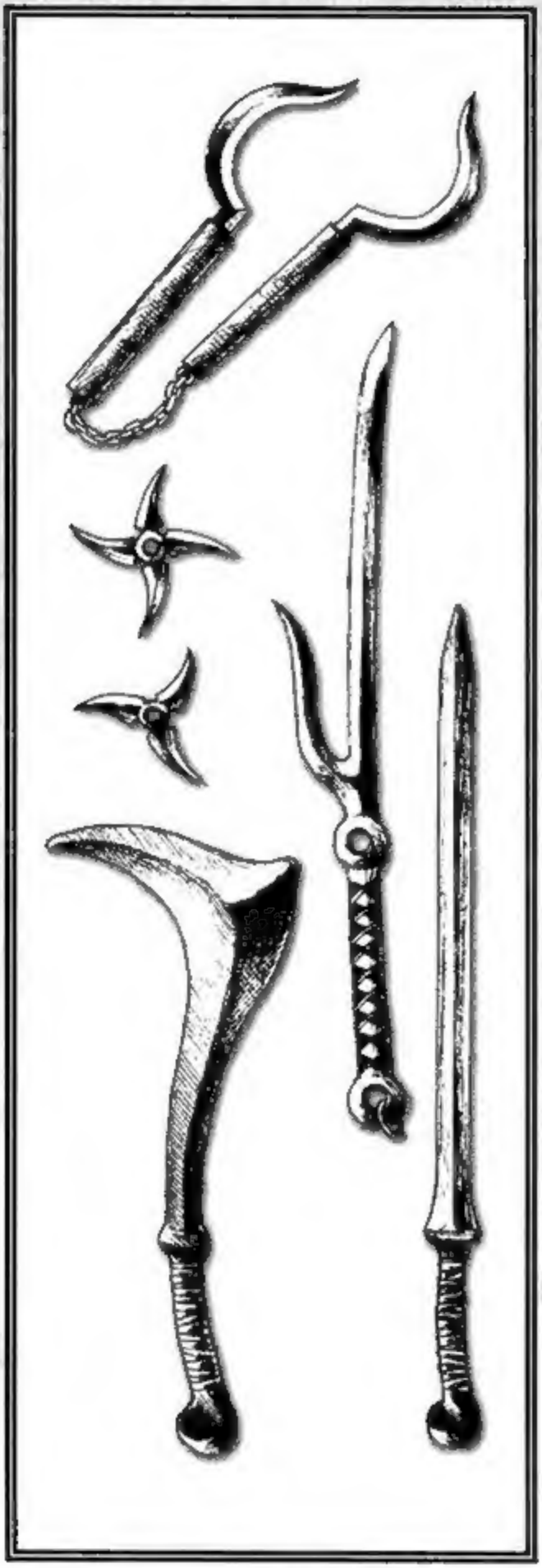
HNNE!
WHIZZ
OH, DARLING... NOT THAT!
HE TOLD US NOT TO TELL THEM WHERE HE'S GOING!
FORGIVE ME, HAYA...

...BUT I COULDN'T JUST WATCH YOU DIE.
AND IF I TRIED TO SAVE YOU BY MY SWORD...
KSHIK
THIS MAN... HE...
HE'S TOO FAR BEYOND ME.
I... I'M SORRY. MY WEAK-NESS...
...MADE ME SELL OUT MY COMRADES.
DAMN IT!!

IF YOU WERE STRONGER...
...I DON'T KNOW HOW THIS WOULD HAVE ENDED. BUT I KNOW ONE THING.
THAT WOMAN WOULD BE DEAD.
THOSE WHO GAIN POWER...
...MUST PAY A PRICE, SOMETHING IN EXCHANGE.
IF YOU SEEK TO BE STRONGER THAN OTHERS...
...YOU MAY HAVE TO LOSE WHAT YOU VALUE ABOVE ALL ELSE.

REMEMBER THIS WELL.

GLOSSARY



ada-uchi: to track down and kill one's enemy. An act of private vengeance, similar to nineteenth-century duels of honor. Such revenge was legal if approved by the *bugyōjō* and registered with the *hantei-jo*.

bakufu: the central government, the bureaucracy that grew up around the Tokugawa Shogunate. Originally established in Edo by the warlord Tokugawa Ieyasu.

banshi: duty officers; in this case, samurai on duty at the *sekisho*

bugyōjō: the Edo-era equivalent of a police precinct station. The *bugyō* was a high-ranked samurai in charge of keeping the peace, with the help of the men under his command and volunteer "posse" members.

daimyō: lords of provincial feudal fiefs known as *han*

de-onna: "departing woman," a woman leaving Edo. Households of important *daimyō* in distant fiefs were often required to relocate to Edo, essentially as hostages to prevent the *daimyō* from rebelling. A woman of the samurai caste travelling out of Edo could be the wife of a *daimyō* escaping, and therefore such women were checked even more strictly than the usual travelers.

dōjō: a hall for martial arts training

Edo: capital of pre-modern Japan, later renamed Tokyo

hantei-jo: an official ruling of the court

Ittō-ryū: radical sword school of Anotsu Kagehisa

kenshi: swordsman (or swordswoman)

kō: companions getting together to visit temples or take in the sights

meshimori-onna: basically, a serving wench, but one expected to perform sexual favors on the side

Mugai-ryū: sword school of the Akagi assassins; literally, "without form"

Mutenichi-ryū: sword school led by Rin's father

Naito Shinjuku: at the time, a way station on the main road west out of Edo. Today a few temple buildings and other remnants remain in Shinjuku Ni-chōme, deep within the limits of modern Tokyo.

obi: a richly embroidered sash used to close a kimono

Okabasho: all red-light districts in Edo other than Yoshiwara

ri: old Japanese unit of measurement equivalent to 2.44 miles

rōnin: a masterless samurai

ryō: a gold piece

sekisho: checkpoint. The central government strictly regulated travel, and all travelers had to submit papers at official checkpoints along the main highways into and out of Edo.

shihan: an instructor of the sword

shinan-jo: training center; *dōjō*

Shingyōtō-ryū: a variety of swordsmanship

shinzō: a young prostitute

Shi-shuku: four areas of old Edo known for their lodgings for travelers but better known as unofficial red-light districts. The four districts (still in existence today in Tokyo, although much transformed) were Shinagawa, Shinjuku, Itabashi, and Senju.

yamabaki: a woman's straw traveling hat for keeping off the sun

Yamato Takeru: a legendary hero, much beloved of Kabuki audiences. Usually portrayed in garish costumes.

yōkan: a sweet jellied bean cake. Better than it sounds.

BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

It is said that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, but in the violent streets of feudal Japan, he is just as likely to be another enemy. Rin and her bodyguard, the immortal swordsman, Manji, face this paradox when they encounter the mysterious Mugai-ryū assassins who, like Rin and Manji, are out for vengeance against Anotsu Kagehisa's renegade sword school, the Ittō-ryū. But is teaming up with a gang of killers and psychopaths really the best way to bring Anotsu down?

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